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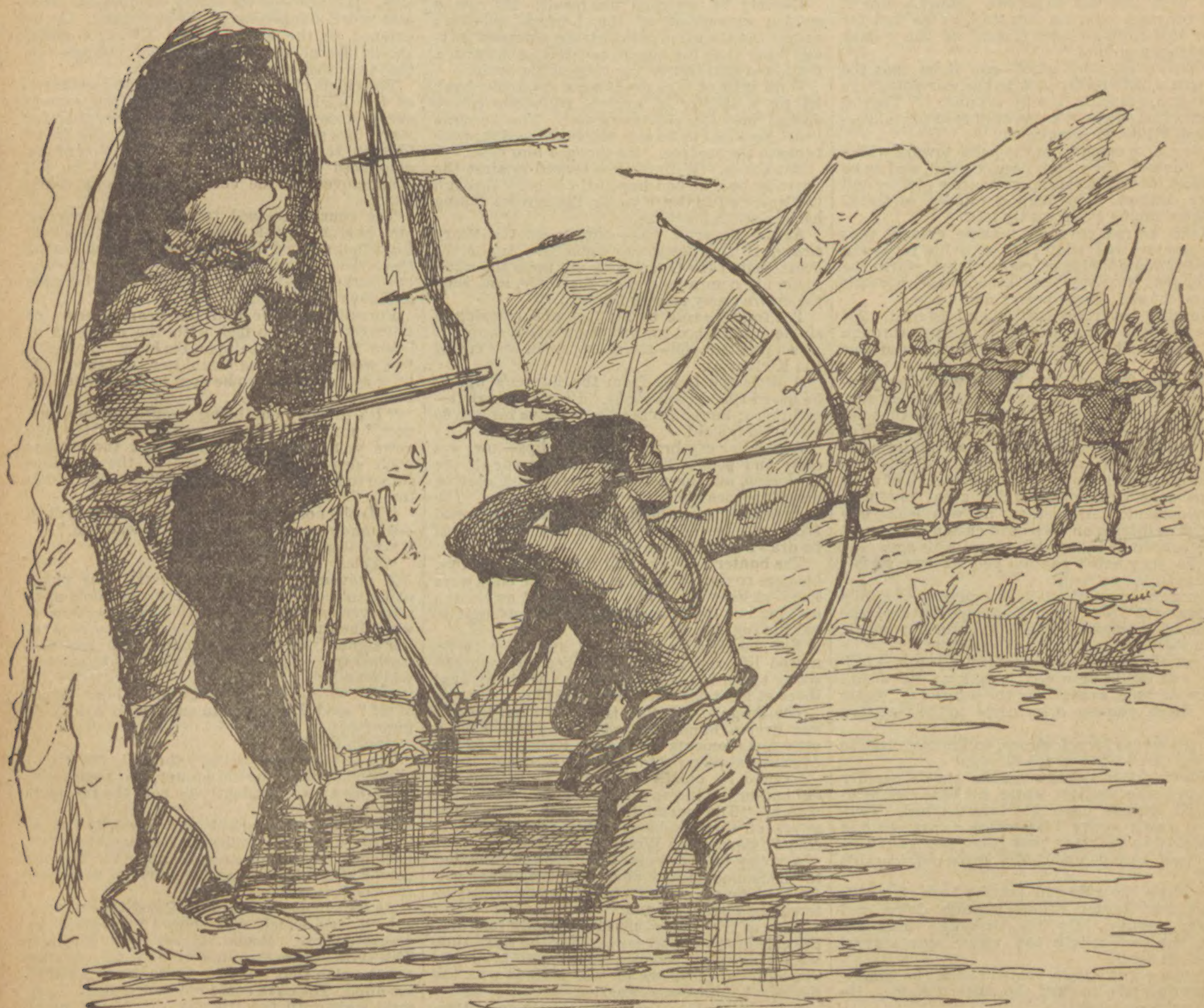
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THE KING OF THE WOODS; or, DANIEL BOONE'S LAST TRAIL.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "CROOKED CALE," "THE BOY PARDS," "DEADLY DASH," "PANTHER PAUL," ETC., ETC.



"DOWN--DOWN, CHIEF!" ROARED THE WOOD KING SHARPLY.

The King of the Woods;

OR,
Daniel Boone's Last Trail.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "OLD DOUBLE FIST," "THE BLACK RIDER," "THE BOY PARADS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

LIGHTFOOT AND THE WOOD VETERAN.

CRACK—crack!

Though faint and far away, there could be no mistaking these sharp, spiteful reports for other than the voice of rifles. The sound was no uncommon one for that region, which is even yet noted for its quantity of game; half a century since "the Osage country" was truly a hunter's paradise.

A man was crossing the Osage river, at a ford, and though near the middle of the stream, the water barely reached his knees. As the twin reports came echoing across the eastern forest, the hunter abruptly paused, bending his head, listening intently.

The rifle-shots alone could scarcely have occasioned the surprise written so plainly on the man's features, since this was hunting-ground common to all—red as well as white. He himself had fired more than once that day.

But closely following these reports came a series of short, peculiar yells—the cries so strongly resembling the yell of a cur-dog when in hot pursuit of a rabbit, that an Indian sends forth when closing rapidly upon a fleeing foe.

The hunter could not mistake this sound, nor its full significance. For nearly half a century it had been familiar to his ear. Many a time it had rung out upon his own trail, as he fled for dear life through the forests of the "dark and bloody ground."

"Thar's mischief afoot—can it be that the varmints have r'ally took to the war-path?" he muttered, glancing keenly around. "They're makin' this way—it's the only ford for miles—reckon I'd better hunt cover!"

The alarm came from the point toward which the hunter's face had been turned, and as he listened, the quick, sharp yells grew plainer and more distinct. Turning, he rapidly retreated to the shore he had recently left.

As he neared cover, it became evident that the hunter was white; though his face was deeply bronzed, almost copper-hued, where the stout jean trousers had been rolled above his knees, the skin showed clear and white.

Nearing cover, he turned and listened. All was still; the yells no longer echoed through the forest. It seemed as though the deed was done.

Bending forward, the hunter was clearly revealed by the bright rays of the noonday sun. That he was old, the long, snowy locks that fell below his rude skin cap plainly evidenced. Yet the weight of years seemed to sit lightly upon his frame. His step was light yet firm, his motions quick and supple. The rude garb of gray jeans only half-concealed his great muscular development. Altogether, he was what one might well term an awkward customer to meet in a hand-to-hand struggle, despite his age.

"No, they hain't got him yet, whoever he is," muttered the veteran.

Upon the crest of a hill, full quarter of a mile beyond the river, his keen glance detected the form of a human being. Only for a moment; then the tree-tops hid him from view.

Scarcely had he disappeared, when the hill-top was again occupied, this time by a full score of men, apparently the pursuers. Again the sharp, yelping cries came to the veteran's ears.

"It's warm for a footrace, so I'd best take to cover. Lucky the cave's handy."

Turning, the veteran hunter strode rapidly through the shallow water, his bare feet leaving no impress upon the gravelly bed. Two-score yards above his position a dark opening appeared in the river-bank, that, though low at the ford, here rose abruptly into a considerable hill.

Holding the rifle and powder-horn above his head, the hunter suddenly sunk down and swam rapidly into the opening. Just before the cave-mouth the water was several yards in depth.

Pausing just within the entrance, the hunter turned his face toward the eastern shore. He had not long to wait.

A man dashed through the undergrowth, sprung down the sandy bank, and ran rapidly

across the level bar, stumbling at the water's edge, falling at full length. From his covert the hunter could see a knife-blade flash in the sunlight, and then the fugitive cast from him the severed part of an arrow that had pierced his leg.

Freed from this incumbrance, he arose and dashed through the shallow water toward the western shore. But several precious moments had been lost, and, with yells of vindictive exultation, nearly a score of savages sprung out upon the river-bank.

The fugitive heard their cries, and glanced back over his shoulder. He saw several of them with bended bows, and suddenly flung himself forward at full length in the water, at this point about knee-deep.

His ruse was successful. The barbed shafts passed over his head, burying themselves harmlessly in the sparkling water.

A loud voice from the bank gave utterance to several hasty words, and as though in obedience to it, half a dozen braves sprung toward the water, the remainder bending their bows ready for instant use in case the fugitive should arise to continue his flight.

With eager interest the white hunter watched this scene, though his countenance showed evident relief when he saw that the fugitive as well as pursuers were Indians. Though far from being one of that class termed Indian-haters, he bore the race little love, for they had dealt his heart more than one crushing blow.

Even at that distance, he could distinguish peculiarities that marked the pursuers as Osages, once the all-powerful rulers of that vast tract of country. Whether or no the fugitive belonged to the same tribe, he could not tell, owing to his so suddenly burying all but head and shoulders in the water.

Eagerly he watched the result. He saw a sudden movement of the hunted red-skin's arms. At the same moment the foremost savage flung aloft his hands, and fell backward, a feathered shaft quivering deep in his brain.

With yells of rage the Osages upon the bank let fly a shower of arrows, while the others dashed into the shallow water. The hunter's heart beat fast as he saw the fugitive disappear beneath the surface. He thought him dead.

But not so. With his feet braced against the gravelly bed, he had impelled his body through the water a full dozen yards, the arrows falling harmlessly in his wake.

Again his arms rose—once more the sharp twang of the bowstring sounded. Again the death-yell of the Osage rung out upon the air—again his comrades yelled furiously, and then the entire party sprung forward.

The fugitive rose to his feet and uttering a single cry, dashed toward the western shore. It was a peculiar yell—the sharp, shrill war-cry of the Kickapoos.

A little cry broke from the hunter's lips as he heard this defiant shout. He recognized it—and more; he recognized the fugitive for a true and tried friend!

A peculiar cry broke from his lips—low, yet clear and penetrating. It met the ear of the Kickapoo, and he perceptibly faltered, casting a swift glance along the now near shore. The Osages also heard the signal, for they slackened their pace, seemingly fearful lest they should be drawn into an ambush.

The hunter's fingers still lingered at his lips, his gaze roving over the enemy. The odds were long—at least ten to one. It seemed as though nothing but death could follow his attempt to aid the fugitive.

Yet the signal was uttered, and as with renewed life, the Kickapoo dashed through the water toward the dark opening. He knew that there at least one friend awaited him.

The Osage at this ford is narrow; but little if any over a hundred yards in width. Then a very few moments carried the Kickapoo to the edge of the deep pool before the cave entrance.

"Come in, chief," guardedly called out the old hunter, as the savage sunk down into the water. "The varmints are bethinkin' themselves of their we'pons ag'in. Down—down, chief!" warned the Wood King sharply.

A volley of arrows shot toward the cave, but the Kickapoo quickly dove, and the hunter was shielded by a point of rock. The missiles pattered harmlessly around.

Then as the Osages splashed rapidly forward, the rifle of the hunter spoke. For the third time within as many minutes a death-yell broke the air, and the clear water was stained with the life blood of an Osage warrior.

With laughable celerity the survivors scattered and buried themselves in the water, barely keeping their noses above the surface, dreading

a volley from the cave. Nor was their chagrin lessened by hearing the taunting cry of the Kickapoo echo out from the dark opening in the bank.

A low, hearty laugh greeted the fugitive as he rose beside the old hunter, who was now rapidly recharging his rifle. Driving home the leathered bullet, the white man remarked:

"Well, chief, the varmints hunted you close. But why is it? The Kickapoos and Osages have long been friends."

"Yeh—friends now—all but Lightfoot—he en'my. Osage dogs put dust in Kickapoos' eyes. Mek all blind—mek dig up hatchet to strike the painted post. Osage say blood is good—Kickapoo say take plenty white scalps. Lightfoot he say no. Den Osage chief he say red dog go follow his white master. Lightfoot is a chief—he is a man. The words were yet hot on the lips of Huspah, when he died. See! his scalp is here," and the Kickapoo fingered the ghastly trophy that hung at his girdle.

"You rubbed the chief out, then, when his braves were lookin' on?" asked the old hunter, evidently understanding the dialect into which the savage had unconsciously glided, though at first using imperfect English.

Lightfoot rapidly recounted the events that had made him an outcast and hunted fugitive, while the eyes of both kept close watch upon the movements of the savages beyond.

The Pottawatomies, Iowas, Foxes, Sauks and Kickapoos were growing uneasy at the constantly increasing strength of the white settlements, more especially of that section then known as the "Boone's Lick Country"—now Howard county. In 1812 a plot was formed for a general uprising, but was discovered in time to be foiled. Since then there had been occasional skirmishing, with slight losses upon either side. But now—in the spring of 1814—another and more dangerous plot was formed. As he listened to the words of the Kickapoo chief, Daniel Boone—for he was the old hunter—felt that the crisis was at hand.

The chiefs of the different tribes had gathered at the Kickapoo village, and at the council every voice but that of Lightfoot was raised for war. His stubborn resistance raised the ire of Huspah, the Osage, who called him a dog of the pale-faced invaders. The next instant he fell dead, cloven to the chin by Lightfoot's tomahawk.

The council seemed transfixed with surprise and horror at this bold act, and untouched, Lightfoot scalped his fallen enemy and darted from the council-lodge, knowing that nothing but instant flight could save him from a horrible and disgraceful death.

Pursuit was made, and for nearly a score of miles the Kickapoo fled, with the avengers of blood treading close upon his heels. Twice he was wounded, else he would have distanced his enemies, for the name he bore had not been idly bestowed.

"It's unlucky our being cooped up here, just now," muttered Boone, uneasily. "It's big news you've told me, chief, and the settlers don't suspect thar danger. If the red-skins strike to-night I'm dubious this'll be a black day for us."

"Mebbe not strike so soon, now Huspah dead—so mus' choose 'nudder chief to lead 'em."

"He was the head one, then?"

"Yeh."

A movement among the enemy now put a pause to the conversation. The dark dots upon the river's surface were cautiously retreating toward the further shore, in obedience to a peculiar signal from one of the number. Those faces washed free of paint by the water, were white and clear.

"He white Injun—Osage call him White Wolf," said Lightfoot, in answer to a look of inquiry from Boone.

"Seth Grable!"

The words came hissing through the tight-clinched teeth of the old hunter, and a stern fire filled his eyes. Evidently he bore the renegade little love.

His rifle was cocked and leveled, but as though suspecting some such message, the white Indian took good care not to expose his precious person. Creeping behind a sand ridge, he gained the woods in safety.

As the savages reached the forest they uttered a loud yell, which was echoed back from the western shore. Boone started and frowned. This showed him the impossibility of carrying out the plan that was even then shaping itself in his mind. The cave could not be left now. They must wait until the friendly shadow of night settled over the earth.

But few words passed between the two scouts.

Yet Boone was given ample cause for anxiety, aside from his personal danger. Lightfoot believed that an attack was to be made simultaneously upon all the white settlements in the Osage country. That very night might witness the carnival of blood.

The hours rolled on, the sun steadily sunk in the west, until hidden behind the tree-dotted hills, and the shadows darkened the surface of the gently flowing river. Within the cave-mouth crouched the two scouts, scarce breathing a word, their weapons ready for instant use, their every sense fully upon the alert. Yet no sound from without told of the proximity of foemen. All was silent save for the hum of insects, the chirping of birds, the splash of some fish as it sportively leaped into the air, or now and then the shrill, piercing scream of the great hawk that slowly circled above the scene.

But then, like magic, all was changed.

The water swept boldly around the upper edge of the cave entrance—the side where Lightfoot was stationed. The Indian suddenly uttered a sharp hiss, bending his strong bow.

The water no longer flowed smoothly. Numerous bubbles dotted the surface. The depths were discolored by sand and mud.

A dark object parted the surface, darting rapidly into the mouth of the cave. The long hair, the draggled plumes, the dusky face were those of an Osage.

The bow of the Kickapoo, bent nearly double, relaxed, the feathered shaft sunk deep into the low brow of the savage.

A stifled shriek—then the body sunk below the surface, dyeing the water red with the tide of life.

Like magic the space before the cave appeared filled with heads, as the maddened Osages swam rapidly forward, clutching their knives, their tomahawks, thirsting for the blood of their daring enemies.

Loud and reverberating the Wood King's rifle spoke, sounding the death-knell of the foremost savage, who sprang half out of the water, casting a long, glittering blade full at the hunter's heart. It was a dying effort, and the weapon scarce penetrated the thick woolen frock.

Lightfoot plied his bow rapidly, crouching back upon the shelf, sending unseen death in swift succession into the crowded mass of his foes. With knife in either hand, Boone stood in the water waist-deep, beating back the desperate Osages with the strength and vigor of renewed youth.

Though brief, the struggle was desperate and bloody. The Osages fought against more than mortal foes. The water whirled swiftly round in the strong eddy before the cave.

Fighting with this they gained a foothold, only to be dashed back by the scouts, dead or wounded.

A few moments thus—then, as by one accord, the Osages sunk down beneath the water's surface and vanished from their enemies' sight. That this was no subtle ruse, the yells of baffled rage that soon afterward arose from below plainly told.

"You're safe, chief!" hastily uttered Boone, emerging from the water, panting heavily.

"Yeh—me all right. You hurt?"

"No—only a scratch. But come—this is our time. We must git out o' here afore the varmints screw their courage up for another lick."

Lightfoot grunted, without speaking, but the Wood King understood him and smiled quietly. He knew the cave secrets better than the Kickapoo did.

"Wassah, chief. I know a way out that they can't find of. 'Tis no true scout that runs into a hole with only one opening. Give me the end of your bow—so. Now follow me carefully."

Grasping one end of the bow, Boone retreated into the cave, proceeding with the confidence of one knowing every inch of the ground to be traversed. For a few yards the floor continued level and smooth; then there came an abrupt ascent, over what seemed irregular steps cut in the hard clay. This, however, was the work of Nature, not that of man.

Boone paused, with a grim chuckle. As Lightfoot gained his side, the veteran said:

"Look up—what do you see?"

The Kickapoo obeyed. Far above his head shone a faint light, partially intercepted by gently waving leaves. A dimly twinkling star told him the truth. Then a cloud shot over this gleam.

"Fix yourself for a tough climb, chief. It's up the inside of a tree we must go. You'll need all your hands and feet," cried Boone, securing his rifle upon his back.

Lightfoot now understood all. Boone had not sought shelter in the cave without knowing how he was to get out of it. And yet this den had often been explored by himself. How had he missed noting this strange passage?

Easily explained. A month or more previously Boone had shot a wild-turkey as it sat upon the tree. It lodged, and, aided by the thickly-clustering grape-vines that shrouded the gnarled trunk, he ascended for his game. It had fallen into the hollow. Aided by a supple vine, he descended into the shell. The bottom gave way beneath his feet, precipitating him into the cave. Thus the discovery was made that was now to open to them the road to freedom once more.

Carefully feeling around, Boone soon secured the severed end of the grape-vine, and then began the ascent. This was difficult, since the hollow of the tree was barely large enough to admit the passage of a human body, and little assistance could be given by the feet, since the knees could only be bent a trifle.

Still, though age and sorrow had sapped his strength, the Wood King raised himself to the top of the trunk, where he clung, panting and exhausted, shaking the vine as a signal to Lightfoot. As the vine tightened Boone peered keenly downward.

Though the tree-top had been broken off at some thirty feet from the ground, its limbs were still vigorous, rising far above the scrub, thickly covered with leaves and twigs. Parting them, Boone gazed downward and around, as well as the increasing gloom would permit.

The hill was nearly bare of trees, with but scant underbrush, a notable exception to the larger hills that rose around, in this respect, since they were densely wooded.

All was still below. Boone could hear nothing to rouse his suspicions, and he believed that their trail was as yet unobstructed.

Beyond a doubt the Osages were ignorant of this unique passage, and so would only think of guarding the cave by the river side. It was but natural to think that, under cover of the darkness, the two scouts would endeavor to escape there by swimming and diving, and their whole attention would be turned toward frustrating this.

Thus Boone reasoned, and events proved that he was right.

Lightfoot completed the ascent easily, and then Boone led the way down the matted mass of grape-vines, using every caution to avoid making any noise that might alarm the Osages. Five minutes later the scouts stood side by side at the foot of the tree.

"Come," muttered Boone, "we must strike out for our friends. They don't dream of the danger brewin'."

"Mus' go tell Yellow-hair fust," doggedly replied Lightfoot.

Yellow-hair, as the Kickapoo called her, was the only daughter of Edward Mordaunt, who, on one of his hunting-trips, had found the Kickapoo senseless, almost dead, beside the body of a panther. With a kindness almost foreign to the borderer in general, Mordaunt carried the savage to his cabin, where Edith and her mother nursed him back to life. By this act of kindness they gained his undying gratitude, and it was mainly his love for them that induced him to fight against the Indian uprising, since they too were numbered among those to be massacred.

"Mordaunt has bin the Osages' fri'nd—surely they won't hurt him?"

"Injun don't know fri'nd now—only see white scalp. Kill, sure—all but Yellow-hair. White Wolf say she be his squaw!"

"The black-hearted devil! But never mind. The time 'll come when he'll stand afore my rifle, an' then he won't need no more squaws," gritted Boone, with an anger that he rarely displayed.

"No—his scalp Lightfoot's," doggedly replied the Kickapoo.

Boone made no reply, but crouching low down, glided noiselessly down the hillside furthest from the river, followed by the chief. Reaching the bottom, they entered a narrow valley, intending to round the large hill before again taking to the water. The settlements were, for the most part, upon the other side of the Osage.

The sky was partially obscured by broken clouds, driving here and there in angry confusion, betokening a storm. An occasional flash of lightning would herald the deep rumbling of thunder, and quicken the footsteps of the scouts.

Half an hour after emerging from the hollow tree, the bank of the Osage was reached, and

with his rifle secured upon a log, which he impelled before him, Boone swam the river, with Lightfoot beside him. Scarce pausing for breath, they plunged into the forest, heading for Mordaunt's cabin.

"Hoooh!" suddenly uttered Lightfoot, pausing and bending his ear as the fresh breeze bore the sound of voices faintly to him.

"The varmints have found out we've gone," and Boone laughed grimly.

"Lose us, den t'ink oders—tek scalp now, sure. White Wolf t'ink 'bout Yellow-hair, now," muttered Lightfoot, uneasily.

"Lead on, chief. I'm old, but I can stand a little brush, I reckon, 'f pushed," retorted Boone.

The two scouts pushed on through the tangled forest at a pace truly marvelous, considering the gloom. And for full an hour they advanced without pausing, until the edge of a small clearing was reached, near the center of which stood a small, rude log-cabin.

"They've gone to bed," muttered Boone, vexedly, for time was precious now; an hour lost or gained might either be life or death to them all.

Edward Mordaunt's voice rung out sharply in answer to Boone's hail, demanding who was there, but a word from the old scout quickly set his fears at rest. The scouts entered, barring the door behind them.

"Wake the women, Ed, an' tell 'em to make haste. You've got to make tracks for a safer spot than this. Do it—you kin take my word for it—I'll explain while they're riggin' up," hastily uttered the Wood King.

Mordaunt obeyed without question, for he had long known the old hunter. Yet he could scarcely believe that his peril was so great, for he had ever treated the Osages with kindness. Still he was not foolhardy enough to close his eyes to the truth.

He hastily prepared his arms and ammunition, with a small bundle of food. While thus occupied, the inner door opened and two women emerged; mother and daughter.

Lightfoot glided forward and knelt before them, bowing his proud head, a softened light filling his eyes. He seemed about to speak, but then suddenly turned his head.

A rapid footstep sounded just without the door, and then a loud rap followed. Once, twice—then a clear voice shouting:

"Up—up, and away! The heathen comes with fire and sword—they thirst for blood! Away—flee, while yet there's time!"

Another thundering knock, then the footfalls rapidly retreated, dying away in the night.

CHAPTER II.

THE WOODLAND TRAGEDY.

"THE crazy man!" cried Boone.

"The Hermit!" echoed Mordaunt.

Lightfoot stood silent, though making a rapid sign with his thumb, that might have represented a cross. An uneasy expression rested upon his strongly-marked features.

"It comes in good time," muttered Boone, drawing a long breath, "be he devil or white man. The red-skins be afoot an' may be upon us at any minnit. All ready?"

"But is not this running blindly upon danger—is there not more safety here behind these walls than out in the open woods?"

"No—you stay here, the sun of to-morrow will never shine for you. How long could you keep the varmints out? One shove from a stout pair of shoulders an' down goes the door. You see now the truth of my words—none but a fool thrusts his scalp into the hands of a Injun."

"But the Osages seemed pleased at my confidence in them. Never an angry word has passed between us!"

"And Seth Grable?"

Mordaunt started. This was a danger he had overlooked. He knew that the half-wild hunter was now a bitter enemy, who had sworn revenge.

Grable had made his mark, deep and bloody, on the pages of Missouri's border history. With Indian blood in his veins—some say a half-breed—he united the worst passions of both races, without the slightest of their virtues. Yet, with at least half a dozen Indian squaws, he had demanded the hand of Edith Mordaunt, as the price of his protection and friendship. Losing sight of prudence, the settler administered a thorough thrashing, ending by kicking the half-breed off his clearing.

"True, old man—but what are your plans?"

"First we'll strike out for Caughlands. With them we kin hold our own ag'in' the varmints, bein' as the cabin is strong. 'Twon't be long

afore my boy, Nathan, 'll hear of the fuss, an' then the varmints 'll have to hunt their holes."

"They suspect nothing. Abel was here this evening."

"Oh, boys will be boys, 'specially when there's gals in the same box. But, never mind, Edith," and Boone turned to the blushing maiden, "Able's a good lad, an' you might go further an' fare wuss."

"Too much talk," sharply interposed Lightfoot, who had been fidgeting uneasily for several moments.

"Right, chief. You know the trail—lead the way. Ed an' I'll see to the women."

First extinguishing the di'n light, the party cautiously emerged from the cabin, closing the door behind them. Gliding across the clearing, they entered the forest. The trail led over a tolerably level tract of ground, densely wooded, the hills being small and widely scattered.

The storm threatened to break at any moment. The leaden masses of clouds had united, shutting out the stars and moon. All below was dark—an intense, almost palpable gloom. As the fugitives threaded the forest in single file along the narrow trail, though keeping within arm's-length, the keenest eye could do no more than dimly distinguish the figure immediately before it.

As though endowed with cat-like vision, Lightfoot led the way, without faltering or once seeming at a loss. Even Boone felt a sense of wonder at his skill.

"That sound—what is it?" abruptly asked Edith, her voice sounding strained and unnatural.

"'Tis the varmints giving tongue—they've found the empty nest, but what they lotted most on gittin' has slipped 'em."

"Dey know trail, too, plenty well. Foller last—Osage got long legs," muttered Lightfoot.

"Yes, we'll have to run for it now. They kin tell to a dot how long we've been gone, an' 'll be sure we've made tracks for Caughlands. They'll try to cut us off, an' 'f they do, our case 'll be desp'rit. Ed, help your wife—I'll look to the little 'un. Chief, lead on—quick time."

The alarm no longer came to the ears of the fugitives. All was still save for their own footsteps and the wailing of the storm-wind through the forest tree-tops.

The rage of the Osages had momentarily broken bonds, at the second disappointment of that night, but was quickly subdued. Their resolve deepened, their hatred and thirst for blood grew more intense. A few sharp, quick commands; then they marched in silence. They entered upon the trail that was to end only in death.

"See! the storm is breaking away," panted Mrs. Mordaunt, and the fugitives paused for a moment to regain breath. "The moon is—"

"'Tis a black moon for us!" groaned the settler, his teeth strongly gritting. "The devils have fired our cabin—now, indeed, we are homeless!"

"Easy, man—a log-cabin is easy raised where timber is so plenty as hereabouts. Thank the Lord that your heads have still got their nat'ral kivering," gravely added Boone.

Lightfoot now arose from his prostrate position upon the ground and muttered a few words in Boone's ear. The veteran seemed agitated, and well he might be.

The Kickapoo said that he had heard suspicious sounds coming from the direction they were pursuing: barely audible yells and indistinct reports of firearms. Making due allowance for the dense forest, he believed these sounds came from Caughlands—from the cabin where they had expected to find a secure refuge.

No other dwelling was near. If the Indians had in reality attacked that, what hope was left the fugitives? Incumbered by helpless women, what could the borderers do? The prospect was dark.

Again Lightfoot led the way along the winding, intricate trail. By following its bends and curves the distance was lengthened, yet no other course could be followed with safety, while feeble women were of the party. The surrounding country was difficult, almost impassable in the darkness, save by the narrow trail.

Once more the guide paused, this time upon the crest of a considerable elevation. No need to ask why—the reason lay plain before them.

Over a mile distant was where stood the Caughland cabin. The spot was plainly indicated now. Only for the surrounding trees, the sturdy log walls might have been distinguished by the fugitives.

A momentarily-increasing glow illumined the dark forest, mounting up toward the heavens. The blazon of death and destruction. The dread signet of the fire-fiend.

"My God! them too!" groaned Mordaunt.

Edith turned ghastly pale, and seemed about to faint. The loving arms of her mother stole around her waist. She knew the sickening fear that filled her daughter's heart.

"The sign's mighty black, I must say, but mebbe 'tis better 'n we think. Mebbe the cabin got afire by accident. Anyhow, we mustn't stop here. If the reds is at work down thar, we've got to pass by 'em. Our only show is to get to the settlements beyond the Blue."

"True. Courage, mother; and you, Edith. Be brave now, and we may escape. But if not, then we will die together!"

"Don't talk about dyin', man, while you've breath enough left to draw a pipe," impatiently muttered Boone. "Foller us, now, an' remember that a false step may end all. It's no fool of a game that we've got to play."

Lightfoot gave a grunt of displeasure, then led the way down the hillside. Taciturn himself, he saw little use in so many words.

Cautiously parting the bushes that almost met above the trail, he searched the level. A few hundred yards further on he paused, and again spoke to the old hunter in the Kickapoo dialect.

"What's the matter now?" anxiously asked Mordaunt.

"Nothin'; the chief thinks it's best that he should go on ahead to spy out the truth. As it is, we're goin' blindfold. We'll wait here until he comes back."

"But is it safe?"

"Nothin's safe when the varmints is up an' ragin' for white blood. But come—we may as well take to kiver."

Boone turned aside from the trail and sought a level space, where the undergrowth was tolerably dense though the trees were few. Here he stationed the trio, then crouched down beneath a bush nearer the trail.

Lightfoot had disappeared like some phantom shape, melting away amidst the gloom. He no longer followed the trail; even without the unmistakable guide in the broad glare of light, he well knew the position of the forest cabin. Toward this he was now pressing with the speed, the silence, the dexterity of a serpent.

He had nearly gained the edge of the Caughland clearing, when he suddenly paused. From behind there uprose a shrill, exultant yell from a full score of throats. It was the cry of the Osages, and proceeded from the crest of the hill near which he had parted from the white fugitives.

Almost as an echo the yell was returned, this time from the clearing in front. There was a slight—almost imperceptible difference in the cry, that told Lightfoot this was part of another tribe—Pottawatomies.

For a moment he hesitated as if about to return to his friends, but then turned and glided rapidly onward. He stood upon the edge of the lighted clearing gazing out upon a wild, peculiar scene.

A massive log-cabin and stable were in flames, burning furiously, yet the huge logs stubbornly resisted their doom. Around were grouped a number of human figures, over a score in number. The firelight shone redly over their almost nude bodies. The dull bronze color—the streaks of paint—the brilliantly dyed plumes—all proclaimed the untamed savage.

Other forms were there, lying prone upon the ground. Some clad in light, flowing garments, some nude; some of both races—the white and the red.

The latter were ranged together, their limbs straightened and composed. The pale-faces lay as they had fallen, mutilated almost beyond recognition. The red flame cast a flickering light over the bare, gory skulls. They had been scalped.

As Lightfoot took in this scene, one of the Indians threw back his head and uttered a long, peculiar cry—the eldritch screech of the panther. At this a truly startling change came over the Kickapoo.

His face became convulsed with what seemed fury and deadly hatred—his eyes scintillated, glowing with a venomous fire. He snatched an arrow from the quiver at his back, and then the tough bow was bent until the flint-head fairly touched its back.

The Pottawatomie still stood with one hand to his lips, the yell yet reverberating through the forest, when the taut string relaxed—a sharp *twang* smote upon their ears, drowned by

a dull *thud* as the feathered shaft quivered deep the naked breast of Leaping Panther, war-chief of the Pottawatomies.

The giant form reeled, then stood grandly erect, with tightly-clinched fists raised on high. Wild and clear, piercing as that of the beast after which he was named, the Leaping Panther breathed forth his life in one defiant war-cry—then sunk to the ground, dead!

Until then, the braves had stood motionless as though petrified. But as their chief fell in death, they darted aside, each seeking some cover where the bright flames would not betray them to the fatal aim of the hidden foe.

Lightfoot glided away from the spot. Now that the deed was done, he realized the folly of which he had been guilty, while other lives depended upon his skill and prudence. True, he had slain a deadly enemy, had kept a solemn oath, but by so doing he had increased the danger threatening those for whom he would lay down his life without a regret. The arrow that had carried death to the Pottawatomie, like all the others in his quiver, was a marked one. A single glance would declare the hand that had sent the death-missile. He would be sought for until killed; though it might be years hence, still the search would never cease while he breathed or a Pottawatomie lived to carry on the hunt of death.

For himself alone it would matter little. He was an outcast—his own tribe had outlawed him; the Osages had sworn his death—this made but one more peril to fight against. But Yellow-hair? He almost cursed the arm that sent the death-shaft upon its mission.

Another cry came from the clearing. Lightfoot paused to listen. An answer came from the hill. Then still others—signals, directions for the movements of each party.

Lightfoot smiled grimly as he read them. To spread out and beat every inch of ground—to capture the audacious murderer *alive* at any cost. Thus he interpreted the signal.

It gave him an idea—bold, desperate, generous. He would yet save Yellow-hair, even though it might be at the cost of his own life. Yet to do so, he must gain speech with Boone.

Rapidly he retraced his steps toward the spot where he had left his friends, yet with a silence that was truly marvelous. Nobly he sustained his *sobriquet*. The fall of the autumn leaf was scarcely more silent than that of his moccasined feet.

All was still in the forest—not a sound broke the air save the wind rustling among the tree-tops, or the creaking of some dead bough. The dark, shrouded heaven lowered angrily, yet the storm held off as though to gather force to annihilate the living puppets below.

Crouching down, Lightfoot listened. All was still. The hill loomed up before him, dark, and indistinct. His friends must be near.

A peculiar sound passed his lips—low but penetrating—the significant *skir-r* of the wood rattlesnake.

Like an echo a similar sound came from his right. The signal was heard and understood. Boone replied to it in kind.

The next moment Lightfoot was beside him, having glided thither like the serpent whose alarm he had usurped. Their heads close together, a few rapid words passed between them.

Lightfoot divulged his plan by which he hoped to baffle the peril that threatened them. It was desperate, but the only one. Alone the men might have crept through the savage cordon; with the women, this was simply impossible.

The Kickapoo turned and glided away, again heading toward the blazing cabin. He used less precaution now, for time was doubly precious. The Osages, he knew, could not be many yards from the fugitives.

Gaining several hundred yards, he dashed forward at full speed, running to avoid the trees, stumps and other obstacles by intuition, for eyesight could avail him but little in such darkness. Again he paused, and now uttered a signal. It was answered almost immediately, from in front, to the left and right. His calculations were correct. The time was at hand for his action, nor did he hesitate, though the result could scarcely be other than death.

The bow he slung across his back. One hand clutched a knife, the other a tomahawk. Then he glided forward, direct for the spot from which the center signal had issued. His keen ear had not deceived him.

A tall, dimly-outlined figure uprose before him, and uttered a few hasty words in the Pottawatomie dialect. Lightfoot did not wait to

understand their meaning. Time was by far too precious.

With the ferocity of a maddened panther he leaped upon the savage, dealing two swift, deadly blows as he did so. Down through flesh and bone sunk the keen hatchet, scattering the skull like an egg-shell—gritting against his breast-bone the long knife.

A husky, gasping sound broke from the stricken brave's lips; it could scarce be called a death-yell. Yet it was heard—it and the furious death-blows, as the quick, sharp exclamations convinced.

Plucking his weapons from their quivering sheath, Lightfoot raised his voice in one loud, clear yell of taunting defiance as he spurned the corpse from him, and plunged into the darkness beyond.

For a moment his enemies stood as if confounded. Something in this bold defiance puzzled them. It seemed the act of a madman, or of one who had some particular point in view that he so daringly invited pursuit.

Once more there came the sound of a brief struggle—again the outcast uttered his shrill, taunting whoop. No longer hesitating, the Pottawatomies dashed forward in hot pursuit.

Crouching down in their leafy covert, the fugitives waited and listened in acute suspense; scarce daring to breathe. They knew that enemies, deadly, vindictive and keen-sensed, were gathered around them, thirsting for blood, each moment drawing the meshes of the web closer. They knew this by the low, peculiar signals that quavered upon the air with the passage of every few moments, now from one side, now the other, drawing nearer and nearer as the savages carefully searched the undergrowth.

Boone and Mordaunt listened painfully, their muscles strung, their weapons in readiness for use when the fatal moment should arrive. They listened for some sound from Lightfoot. Would he be in time? Or if so, would the enemy all be deceived?

The suspense was fearfully trying, but fortunately did not last long. Crouching there, the fugitives heard the loud yell of Lightfoot, as he sprung away from his first victim.

The women shuddered as the cry echoed by, reverberating from the hills, roaring through the tree-tops, strangely blending with the first howlings of the tempest. Could it be human—the voice of a fiend?

Yes—Boone recognized it without difficulty. Just then it sounded like music in his ears.

Other ears caught the sound, and with little cries the Osage warriors sprung to their feet, bending forward, eagerly listening. They too recognized the voice of the tribeless outcast!

Crouching there, the fugitives could distinguish the outlines of more than one savage foe, so near had they crept. Will they pass on? 'Tis a moment of horrible suspense.

Again the defiant cry of the Kickapoo sounds forth the death-knell of a Pottawatomie, and then, with wild yells, the Osages leap forward, an intense yearning scorching their hearts.

Boone suddenly flattens his muscular figure to the earth, but the effort is useless. A dark figure bounds through the air, crashing through the frail bush, alighting fairly between the broad shoulders of the Wood King.

One of the Osages had blindly leaped upon Boone's back. A quick, writhing movement, and the savage is hurled headforemost to the ground. And then a grip of iron is fastened upon his throat. A bright blade hisses through the air and buries its length in the Indian's back.

Stricken to death, the savage struggles and writhes convulsively, with what seems more than mortal strength. The hunter's fingers contract like the claw of an eagle, and the heavy knife once more buries itself in the quivering flesh.

With one frantic effort the savage frees his throat and gives utterance to a maniacal shriek of death-agony. Then, as though satisfied that his death would speedily be avenged, he lay motionless at the feet of the old scout, dead!

"Hist! for your lives! Don't stir a peg!" hissed the Wood King, as Mordaunt partially arose.

The death-shriek of the Osage had reached the ears of his comrades, and they paused, startled, alarmed. All was still now, save the far-away yells of the Pottawatomies, as they darted away in pursuit of Lightfoot.

The fugitives' hearts beat high. They prayed that the savages might pass on, lured by the thrilling chorus beyond. But this was not to be.

Several of the braves turned and cautiously retraced their steps, signaling each other con-

stantly. Boone placed his lips close to Mordaunt's ear, muttering:

"If they find us, give 'em the best you've got. Tell the women to slip off through the bushes at the first yell—not afore. Speak sharp, so they'll mind."

Mordaunt obeyed. Half-paralyzed with terror the women promised to follow his directions.

Boone clinched his teeth. He saw that discovery was inevitable. Already he could distinguish several dusky figures gradually nearing their covert, and, knowing the advantage of dealing the first blow, signed to Mordaunt to follow his example.

The long rifle sprung to his shoulder, being cocked at the same moment. Then it spoke, the bright flash illumining the spot for yards around, also revealing full half a score crouching savages. A death-yell was blended with the report—followed by another, as the settler's rifle vomited forth its contents.

"Scatter now!" hissed Boone, rolling rapidly aside, barely escaping several bullets and arrows that tore the ground beneath the bushes.

His further words were drowned by the angry yells of the infuriated Osages, as they sprung forward, thirsting for blood.

A horrible scene then transpired in the gloom. A ferocious *melee*—a struggle for life or death.

Twice the savages reeled back from before the pale-faces, but again they surged forward, their number constantly augmenting. One, two, three minutes of deadly strife. Then Edward Mordaunt sunk down upon the pile of dead savages, his skull cloven in twain.

A shriek of agony burst from the wife as she witnessed his fall, and, forgetful of self, she tottered forward with outstretched arms as though to protect him. A blow—a groan—husband and wife united, never more to part.

Edith shrieked as an Indian seized her, with uplifted hatchet. A dark form sprung between—the Osage fell dead. Strong arms carried her a few steps, then relaxed their grasp. A momentary flash of lightning revealed to her the convulsed features of Lightfoot—then she saw no more; she had swooned.

CHAPTER III. THE CHIEF'S PERIL.

THE face upon which Edith Mordaunt's eyes fell, during the momentary glare of the lightning, was indeed that of Lightfoot, the Kickapoo outcast.

Even as his daring ruse seemed fully successful, he heard the double report—the wild yell of angry vengeance that told of his friends' discovery by the Osage braves. He knew that Yellow-hair was in peril most imminent, and the knowledge nearly crazed him.

Like a madman, he turned abruptly and rushed back toward the spot where he had left his friends, caring nothing for the risk he himself run—thinking only of *her*. Bewildered by this new alarm, taken by surprise by the desperate rush of the outlawed chief, the Pottawatomies allowed their enemy to slip through their fingers when the game was fairly their own.

Halting for nothing, Lightfoot dashed on at top-speed, fearing lest he should be too late. He sprung into the little opening with drawn hatchet and knife.

He heard Edith shriek, and thus guided, he sprung to her side. A brawny Osage stood bending her head backward by the long hair, a blood-stained tomahawk brandished on high.

With a fierce, grating snarl, Lightfoot leaped at his throat. Then followed a swift stroke—the savage writhed in death-agonies at the feet of the Kickapoo.

"Lightfoot save you, or die!" muttered the chief, as he gathered the trembling form to his broad breast.

He sprung forward a few steps, then faltered, his eyes dazzled, blinded by the unusually vivid flash of lightning that shed around the brightness of noonday.

A dark form leaped before him—a heavy weapon fell with a dull *thud* full upon his unprotected head, and Lightfoot sank lifeless to the ground.

Edith shrieked faintly as she recognized the stricken form—then, with a dim sense of being tight clasped by strong arms to a broad breast, her senses reeled and she fainted.

And Boone, the Wood King?

He fought bravely, desperately, with the strength, skill and activity of renewed youth. He struggled on while a gleam of hope remained—until he alone of that little band of fugitives

was left upon his feet. All were down—either dead, dying or senseless.

Then he thought of his own safety. Flight, instant and speedy, alone could save him, before the scattered Osages could fairly surround him.

Calling into play every muscle of his stout frame, he sprung forward, swinging the long, heavy rifle before him. Two savages fell before its tremendous sweep, and an opening was made.

Through this Boone darted, striking down, broken and helpless, the arm that was raised to stay his flight. Then a wild thrill ran through his veins as he realized that all his foes were behind him—and a single exultant yell broke from his lips as he darted away through the forest, entering upon a stern, desperate race for freedom if not life.

His shout told the Osages all, and they dashed after him with yells of horrible rage, that not even the deafening peal of thunder could entirely drown.

At least the defiant cry of the Wood King was productive of one good result, whatever might be its effect otherwise. Lightfoot was just staggering to his feet, when Boone broke away, and drawn off by the cry, the Osages passed him without notice.

Still confused by the heavy blow that had felled him to the ground, Lightfoot supported himself by a bush, and stared around him. The storm was beginning to rage, the lightning-flashes followed each other in rapid succession, lighting up a soul-harrowing scene.

A glimpse of a woman's garments roused Lightfoot from his half-stupor, and with an inarticulate cry he sprung forward and sunk to his knees. Breathlessly he waited for the next gleam of lightning.

In that score of seconds he suffered the tortures of the damned. He knew that he knelt beside the dead. His hand rested shudderingly upon the shattered skull of a woman. He feared it was that of Yellow-hair.

The character of Lightfoot may seem exaggerated—overdrawn, but not so. True, he was an Indian among a thousand, but such a being really lived and breathed. Edith Mordaunt had, by her tender care and skillful nursing, brought him safely out from the very shadow of death. He owed his life to her. He was ready to pay the debt; for her sake he had renounced his tribe, his people, his faith—for her he had become an outcast. He would have died to spare her one moment's pang. And now he believed he was kneeling beside her dead and mangled body.

The flash of lightning came, and a cry of joy broke from the Indian's lips. The blood-stained hair beneath his hand was gray—almost white; that of Mrs. Mordaunt.

His cry was echoed by that of another being—faint and rattling. As the lightning died away, he turned quickly toward the point from whence it proceeded. All was intensely dark; he could distinguish nothing.

Again the lightning cast a brilliant glow over the scene, and revealed to Lightfoot his peril. Only a few yards distant an Osage crouched low to the ground, a bent bow in his hands, the barbed shaft pointed full at his heart.

This much he saw, and then the glow died out. At the same moment a faint *twang* met his ear, and a burning pain seemed tearing deep to his very heart.

With an angry snarl he sprung forward, grappling with the Osage. It was an unresisting enemy. Not a quiver or a moan followed the knife-thrust. With the loosing of the arrow, the spirit of the Osage brave had fled to its happy hunting-grounds. True to his teachings, his last act was to deal the enemy a blow.

Lightfoot felt at his breast. A few drops of blood stained his fingers, but the arrow was gone. He probed the wound—it was but a trifle. The strength of the dying brave had not equaled his determination.

The Kickapoo arose, and by the quick-following flashes of lightning carefully scrutinized the spot. To his joy he found nothing of Edith—because by that he knew that she still lived.

In the alternate gloom and brightness he glided around, stooping momentarily over each one of the dead savages. He was an Indian. He knew how to strike his living enemies sorest. On the morrow the Osage tribe would wail over their scalpless dead.

Standing erect, he flung back his head as though bidding defiance to the lightning's shaft, the thunder's bolt, as the long-pent-up storm broke in all its fury. The wild, thrilling scalp-

ery of the Kickapoo resounded through the hills and forest—then the outcast chief turned and disappeared in the darkness.

And now the flashes came less frequent, the thunder-peals less heavy; the rain falls in torrents, as though eager to wipe out forever the evidence of crime and bloodshed that stained the earth's fair surface.

Believing himself the only survivor, and knowing that his only hope of escape with life was in speedy flight, Boone darted away through the forest, closely followed by united Osage and Pottawatomie braves. In that darkness, only relieved by the dazzling flashes of lightning that left all in even denser gloom than before, by force of contrast, flight was not only difficult but dangerous.

Yet the veteran ranger, thoroughly skilled in the craft that had been the study of his life, wound his way through the tree-trunks growing so thickly around, over fallen timber and other obstacles, with truly marvelous celerity and ease. But after him came others equally as expert, fired by a burning thirst for vengeance upon the one who had that night dealt them such a bitter blow.

Boone had already shaped the details of a plan by which he hoped to escape his pursuers, and now bent every energy of his body to the first point: that of gaining a few yards' greater lead. With this purpose he dashed ahead at a dangerous pace, though knowing that a single misstep might end in his death or capture.

At this point the storm broke in all its fury, and in it the scout recognized a truly welcome ally. The rain fell in torrents, pattering loudly upon the tree-tops, that soon began to shed their watery load upon the undergrowth beneath their boughs.

A few moments later Boone suddenly paused, pressing close to the gnarled trunk of a huge tree that had been momentarily revealed by the glare of lightning. Here, holding his breath, trying to still the loud throbbings of his heart, he stood with knife tight clinched in his hand, to await the result of his ruse.

One, two, half a dozen savages dash by, running with hushed voices now, for they dread losing their prey, since the tempest so nearly drowns his footfalls. Then others pass by panting, losing hope with each step.

A minute passes—then a wild yell comes from beyond the point toward which the savages had chased a phantom. They had missed their prey. Boone smiled grimly.

"Yelp on, ye bloodthirsty curs—yelp on till your throats split with hate an' fury. The trail's broken—the nose of a true-bred hound couldn't splice it now," muttered the Wood King.

Rapidly gliding a few yards to the right, Boone paused beneath a broad-spreading elm tree, and clutching the ivy vines that shrouded its trunk, clambered up to the limbs. When nearly a score feet from the ground he paused, and crouching down upon the gnarled limb, listened intently.

Numerous signals filled the air, the voices of birds and beasts, but the veteran smiled contemptuously at the frail disguise, perfect as the imitations were. On such a night not even the panther ventured from its den, still less the feathered tribe. He knew that the savages were beating the forest for him, knowing that he had put some such ruse in operation as the one described.

"Let them hunt—an owl couldn't spy me out here in the night, an' I reckon they'll tire of it afore day," muttered Boone, carefully shielding the lock of his rifle from the rain-drops.

More than once during that long night he could hear the cat-like footsteps of the savages as they prowled about hoping to light upon some trace of their enemy. But then all grew still, save the dull, monotonous patter of the rain-drops upon the already saturated leaves.

Gradually the old hunter yielded to his fatigue, and leaning back against the gnarled tree-trunk, slept on peacefully and calmly as though in a bed beneath a hospitable roof. And when he awoke, the new day had dawned, the sun-rays were just tinging the crests of the tallest trees.

The storm was over, and the fresh-washed face of Nature appeared doubly beautiful. The feathered denizens of the forest were in full voice, and for a moment the Wood King lay listening, half-dreamily, for the moment forgetful of the dread events of the past night.

But then he remembered all; once more he was the stern wood ranger. Listening intently, his keen eyes roved over every foot of ground visible from his perch. A rapidly-flitting bird—a pair of playful gray squirrels met his gaze;

nothing human—nothing of the savages who had hunted him so hard the night just past.

Noiselessly he turned and forced the wiping-stick into his rifle. The barrel had dried during the night. Then he loaded it carefully, picking powder into the vent, priming it, and then scraping the flint. He knew that his life might depend upon the fidelity of his rifle.

With the lightness of the velvet-footed panther, Boone dropped to the ground, thumb upon hammer, finger touching the trigger, and glared around. But his suspicions were unfounded. No enemy was near. They had abandoned the search in despair, knowing that, their blows begun, there could be no rest for them while a single pale-face drew breath in the Osage country. Night and day they must labor, or a fearful retribution would overtake them.

Cautiously, with ready rifle, Boone retraced his steps toward the opening that had been the scene of death. He had no hope of finding any of his friends alive, yet he could not restrain the impulse that urged him on.

He stood upon the edge of the opening. The scene of the massacre was marked by the snarling, scuffling forms of half a dozen wolves. As the hunter strode forward, they slunk away, howling lugubriously.

Stout-hearted, iron-willed though he was, Boone felt a thrill of horror creep over his frame as he gazed down upon the torn and trampled ground. A few tattered fragments of clothing—a number of bare, dismembered bones, nothing more. The four-footed scavengers had completed the work of their brother wolves in human form. This was all that was left of the true-hearted settler and his wife. The hunter turned pale even through the deep sundye, and fierce words gritted through his tight-clinched teeth.

"May God's curse rest upon the black-hearted devils, until every mother's son o' them is like these poor critters! To think that only yesterday they was all well an' hearty, an' little Edith—Ha!"

He paused abruptly in his mutterings and glanced hurriedly around—almost wildly. Could it be? Only two skulls were visible—only two! Then where were the others? Those of Edith and Lightfoot?

"Kin it be they got off? Sure I saw 'em both fall!"

With heart throbbing painfully the old scout reached the vicinity, fearing the worst—scarce daring to hope.

Then he paused, glanced quickly toward the forest. The sound of footsteps rustling among the undergrowth caught his ear, and he crouched down behind a scrubby bush, with rifle cocked in readiness for use.

A human figure stepped into view, followed by another. Boone sprang to his feet, for he recognized them. They were white men—settlers.

"Fosdick—an' you, Kingsley, is all well at the settlements?" eagerly cried Boone, springing forward.

"Yas—but thar's b'en black work 'mong the outlyin' cabins, it seems. So much fer trustin' the red devils too fur—ef all 'd 'a' b'en o' my mind, this wouldn't 'a' happened, fer lack o' hands to do it with," growled the burly borderer.

In cooler blood, though, even Fosdick was forced to admit that all the Indians were not bad, since to timely information given by several, the "Boone's Lick Settlement" was saved from almost entire massacre, and the insurrection nipped in the bud; only a few of the more isolated cabins were destroyed and the settlers killed.

"How did you chauce to hear of this so soon?"

"Abe Dare brung us word—"

"Abe Dare—then the varmints didn't kill him 'th the rest?" echoed Boone, in astonishment.

"No—he's thar by the cabin—or rather what was the cabin, 'th some o' the boys, a-pickin' up the old folks."

Boone hastened to the spot, and found the truth had been told. Here too the four footed wolves had been at their horrible feast. Around the still smoldering ruins the bones of the ill-fated settlers were scattered.

The hunter found Abel Dare pale and stony—sadly changed by that night's events. Boone wondered if he yet knew all, but feared to put the question that would decide his doubts.

From the talk of the settlers he learned how it came that Dare had escaped the massacre of his adopted parents, for the young man spoke never a word. Pale and icy stern he worked on, hollowing out a rude grave to contain all that remained on earth of his loved ones.

That evening Abel Dare had visited the Mordaunt cabin, for Edith was his promised wife. On his return home he met the little son of a neighbor, going in quest of assistance. By an awkward fall his father had broken a leg. Abel returned with the boy, and by that act of kindness, in all probability escaped death. The fracture was a simple one, and he managed to set it. Scarcely had he succeeded, when the little boy spoke of a bright light over the hill-top. Its position roused Dare's fears—he believed it to be from his own clearing. At top speed he hastened there—but too late. The tragedy was over. His friends had rushed forth from the blazing pile, only to meet death at the hands of the demoniac savages. He could see their ghastly bodies lying in the full glare of the fire, with the yelling, exultant fiends dancing around in mad glee.

His rifle sprung to his shoulder, and the hammer fell; but with a simple click. In his mad race through the forest the flint had fallen out. This discovery recalled his senses. The savages numbered over a score; to attack them now would but insure his own death—and he resolved to live for vengeance. With this thought uppermost in his mind, he turned and hastened at top speed for the settlements, never faltering once on the long trail, his muscles nerved by the sight he had just witnessed. He found the settlement greatly excited. Some friendly Indians had betrayed the plot for its destruction. Yet half a dozen men answered his appeal, for the most part single men, hunters and scouts—the ones who were now with him.

In silence Boone listened to the plans—if such they could be called—of the scouts. They swore vengeance upon the tribe of Pottawatomies in general. An Indian was an Indian to them; whether their hands had shed this blood mattered not. "A life for a life"—true border law—this was their creed.

"An' thar drops number one!" snarled Jim Fosdick, throwing up his rifle, as a dusky form stepped out into the clearing and advanced toward them.

"Stop!" cried Boone, knocking up the weapon, sending the ragged bullet hissing over the tree-tops. "That's a true fri'nd—hurt him, an' you must deal 'th me!"

"He's a Injun," muttered the scout, sullenly. "But his heart's white; he resked his life last night to save the Mordaunts—"

"What—what did you say, old man?" cried Abel Dare, rousing from his apathy, his face flushing, his eyes glowing like living coals.

"Be cool, boy; 'tain't so bad but it might be wuss," muttered Boone, uneasily, beckoning for the Indian to approach, for Lightfoot had started toward cover at his unceremonious reception. "I don't think—that is, I hope the gal is alive."

Abel Dare sunk to the ground in a nerveless heap, with a groan of heart-rending despair. This new blow, following so closely what he had already undergone, broke down his forced composure, and he wept like a child. Boone motioned the men aside. He knew that it was better so; these tears might ease the overtasked brain, and keep it from utterly giving way.

By his directions, the scouts gathered the remains of Mordaunt and his wife together, and placed them in a shallow grave, while he and Lightfoot searched the vicinity in the faint hope of finding some trace of Edith. But their efforts were unavailing. The heavy rain had obliterated all footprints.

Boone closely questioned the Kickapoo, but instead of throwing any light upon the subject, his statement rendered the uncertainty still deeper.

On recovering his senses, he had followed on after the Indians who were hunting for Boone, mingling with them in the darkness without fear of discovery. He soon learned that Edith was not with them, but neither was the White Wolf, Seth Grable. Still hoping to learn something of her—and resolving to free her, if need be, at the cost of his life—Lightfoot kept near the savages, even after they abandoned their hunt for Boone. They returned to the opening, to find their own dead scalped. Their rage and shame were delicious morsels to the Kickapoo. Carrying these to the hill, they hid the bodies in a gully, then set forth on their mission of blood. Knowing that Edith would not be taken upon such a tramp, Lightfoot left them and searched elsewhere; but all in vain. He could find no trace of either her or Grable.

"But we will find her, if alive—I swear to it!" and then the two men crossed palms; in each other's eyes they read the same resolve.

At this moment Abel Dare came up, ghastly

pale, his eyes glowing like those of a madman's. In husky tones he called upon the men to follow him—that he would lead them to strike a blow for vengeance. The scouts seemed to catch the infection—they cheered wildly and then followed the lead of the half-crazed man.

Only Boone and Lightfoot held back. Yet they did not expostulate. They knew how useless that would be.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OSAGE VILLAGE.

BOONE seemed perplexed and ill at ease. For some minutes he watched Lightfoot as he quartered the opening like a hound searching for a lost scent; but then a signal called the Kickapoo to his side. With a few low words, Boone turned and retraced the route they had followed the night before in their flight from the Osages.

The clearing that once contained the happy and peaceful home of Mordaunt, was gained. A heap of black, unsightly ruins was all that was now left.

Making a circuit of the clearing, the scouts knew that no human being had been there since the rain ceased. Boone frowned, though he had scarcely dared hope for a different result.

Pausing beneath the shelter of a tree, the scouts consulted on their future course. Blind as the trail was, neither one dreamed of abandoning the search until they should either rescue Edith or obtain proof of her death.

A sudden recollection caused Lightfoot's eyes to glisten—his hopes to rise. He believed he possessed a clue by which the broken trail might be regained.

Several times mention has been made of Seth Grable, a mongrel renegade, also that he boasted the possession of several squaws. Lightfoot knew that one at least of these lived apart from her tribe and was frequently visited by the White Wolf at her little cabin in a snug valley beside the Osage. By mere accident Lightfoot had made this discovery, while out hunting, and now as he recalled the lone and well-hidden refuge, he believed Edith would be concealed there by the renegade until the storm blew over.

"The idee's wuth a trial, anyhow," said Boone, in a thoughtful tone. "T any rate, we kin find whar the varmints crossed the river. Lead on."

Lightfoot glided forward, with Boone steadily tramping at his heels. The distance was considerable, and the sun was high in the heavens before the valley was reached. Cautiously the scouts crept toward the little vine-covered cabin, though there was little need of their precautions, for the nest was empty. The rain-softened earth around retained no trace of feet—the cabin had evidently been deserted before the storm.

The scouts looked at each other in silence. Their disappointment was great. Another hope was gone. Would the broken trail ever be united—the lost one found?

In dogged silence they headed up-stream. Across the river, stood the village of the Osages yet miles distant. If Edith had not been taken there, they knew not what to think.

For nearly an hour they pressed on, closely scrutinizing the river-bank, so as not to overlook any trail. Then both scouts paused abruptly.

Now, as on the fatal night just past, the sound of firearms and human voices raised in anger came to their ears from the direction they were following. A moment Boone hearkened, then muttered, as he sprung forward:

"It's the boys—they've run ag'in' a nest of the varmints. Come, chief, we must lend 'em a hand."

The two scouts dashed forward along the river-bank at full speed, the sounds of the conflict growing plainer and more distinct, now at no great distance. Reaching the summit of a small hill, the scouts momentarily paused.

Below them were the combatants—a number of Pottawatomies and the white settlers who had followed the reckless lead of Abel Dare. A true bush-fight was in progress. Each man closely hugged his tree, stump or log, carefully shielding himself, while keen to take advantage of any false move of his adversary.

Yet Boone's brow darkened as he took in the situation at a glance. He saw that his friends were in really great peril—that they were outnumbered, that the Pottawatomies were gradually spreading out so as to command front and both flanks, where they could pick off the settlers at their leisure.

He glanced into Lightfoot's eyes. The answer to his unspoken question was plainly written

upon the Kickapoo's face. He too saw the peril and was eager to baffle it, though more from hatred to the tribe of Pottawatomies than love for the hardly-bested white hunters.

The distance was too great for Lightfoot to use his bow with effect, and it was necessary for the success of their plans that the savages should be terrified as well as surprised.

Fifty yards below was a dense clump of bushes, and toward this Lightfoot glided, trusting that, even if observed, his features would not be recognized. Boone remained upon the hill. His rifle easily commanded the enemy's position.

Reaching the cover, Lightfoot quickly fitted an arrow to the bow, and loosing it at the back of an exposed Pottawatomie, sent forth his shrill, fear inspiring war-cry. Almost simultaneously the rifle of the Wood King spoke, and his full, deep voice sent encouragement to the hearts of the settlers.

Amazed, bewildered by this sudden and deadly attack in their rear, the Pottawatomies leaped to their feet, glaring wildly around.

Crack—crack—crack! Then hastily reloaded rifles from among the settlers were discharged—like a shaft of light another arrow sped from Lightfoot's covert, ran'ling deep in the very heart of a battle-scarred warrior.

With a loud cheer Boone broke cover, dashing down the hill. The settlers answer him—so does Lightfoot. The Pottawatomies believe themselves surrounded and outnumbered. With cries of dismay they turn and flee, leaving their dead and dying behind them.

They are not pursued far. The settlers have learned a lesson in prudence that they will not soon forget. One of their number is dead, another at his last gasp, while scarcely one of the others but bears some token of the struggle. Yet the savages had suffered far more severely, since, in all, nine dead bodies marked the accuracy of the pale-faces' aim.

Boone drew aside with Abel Dare, who seemed far more like his usual self, though still fitful and wild in both actions and speech. In a few words Boone heard all he had to tell. No trail had been found or any adventure met with until they stood face to face with the Pottawatomies, when, without stopping to calculate the chances, the settlers began the fight.

At this moment Jim Fosdick advanced, evidently as spokesman of the party. He said they had accomplished what they set out to do—dealt a blow at the enemy and secured more than scalp for scalp. That their duty now was to help protect the settlements.

Abel Dare began a testy reply, but Boone checked him.

"They're right, lad, though you mayn't think so just now. Every man's arms is needed thar, for thar the varmints will strike the heaviest licks. It's right—don't say anything ag'in' thar goin'."

"And you, toot! So be it—I will work alone. Though all the rest abandon you, Edith, I will save you or die! For you don't think those devils murdered her, do you?" he wildly added, imploringly gazing into the face of the old hunter.

"No, I don't. Never mind my reasons just now. But see—I b'lieve she's alive; that I kin find her—an' I've swore that I'll git her away from the varmints if mortal man kin do it," quietly replied Boone.

"Then you ain't goin' back with us?"

"No, Jim; the chief an' I have other work on hand."

"And I—I go, too."

"You'd better go back with the boys, Abel. We two kin do all that's needed, specially as sarscument must come into play."

"I will go—if not with you, then alone," doggedly added Dare, his black eyes gleaming.

"All right—you shall go."

A few more words were spoken and then the party separated, the settlers carrying with them the bodies of their friends, to bury them in some spot where the savages would not be likely to unearth them for the sake of their scalps. The three scouts continued up the river-bank, shortly after, crossing at the ford previously mentioned.

At mid-afternoon they paused, and composed themselves to rest, snugly ensconced in a dense thicket that covered the summit of a hill overlooking the Osage village. They needed rest, and could do nothing until the shades of night fell upon the earth.

But few words were wasted in idle speech. During their tramp the subject had been sufficiently discussed, and each one perfectly understood the part allotted to himself. Their search for Edith was to begin at this point,

since it was the village of that portion of the Osage tribe to which Seth Grable had allied himself. Since the captive was not at his own private cabin, she must be here.

Boone and Dare lay down beneath the cooling foliage and were speedily sound asleep. Lightfoot, though his eyes had been sleepless for at least forty-eight hours, remained at his post overlooking the village, seemingly as tireless as though a mere machine.

The village seemed unusually lively and bustling, though, as he could see, the crowd consisted mainly of squaws and papposes, with a few able-bodied warriors—probably a score, in all. Through his watch, he saw nothing of Grable or Edith. Yet there was nothing in that to be wondered at.

The sun had long disappeared when Lightfoot touched Boone and Dare, as a signal that the time was at hand for their work to begin. The sky was clear and cloudless, the stars twinkled brightly though the moon had not yet risen.

"It's all understood, then," said Boone, with an uneasy glance at Abel. "The chief is to enter the village an' find out whether the gal is in there or no. We're to wait for him outside."

"Yes; but it seems to me a coward part to play," muttered Dare, fingering the knife at his belt.

"It's policy. The chief is of thar own color, understands the lingo as well as his own tongue. He kin go unsuspected whar we'd be found out at a glimpse. You must see it's for the best; an', mind ye, Abel, you mustn't strike in out o' turn, or we'll leave you to do the job in your own way."

Dare grumbled something about its being hard to be forced to remain idle while others worked, but agreed to obey. Then the trio cautiously glided down the hillside and neared the outskirts of the Indian village.

This was a permanent place of habitation, where the Osages had lived for many years, and was of a substantial nature. The village was pitched amid hills, to protect it from the cold winds of winter, close to a creek that wound through the valley, only a few hundred yards from the forest that furnished them with fuel for their meals. Most of the huts were built of mud, with bark roofs; a few were of stone, rudely held up with clay mortar. Beyond the huts rose a stout, commodious horse-corral, with boundaries defined by high walls of timber, fallen trees dragged into place, strengthened by stakes planted firmly in the ground.

At the edge of the clearing Lightfoot left his comrades, and glided out from the trees. Crouching low down in the gloom, he glided rapidly toward the corral, then partially skirting the village.

Gaining the wall he paused to reconnoiter. The village was all alive. A number of fires burned brightly. The savages were hastening to and fro, or gathered in little knots, gossiping. There seemed little likelihood of their settling down for the night. To enter the lighted street was almost certain discovery, and that meant death to the Kickapoo now. Yet he did not hesitate long. A quick gesture, and he was changed. A moment's fumbling altered his scalp-lock into that of a Fox. His form seemed to sink into itself, becoming less tall, more squat. In the grotesquely distorted features, one could scarcely recognize the handsome Kickapoo chief.

A moment later and he was within the lighted village, stalking leisurely along, brushing shoulders with his most deadly enemies, unsuspected. Yet, though he had almost completed the circuit of the village, passing within earshot of each group of gossips, lingering near each cabin, Lightfoot gained no knowledge of the one he sought. Could it be that she was not in the village?

He paused beside one of the cabins and listened intently. The sound of low voices reached his ear, though but indistinctly. There seemed something familiar in the tones of one of the speakers that sent a thrill through his veins. With bated breath, Lightfoot hearkened.

The voices ceased, and the chief heard a light footstep. Mechanically he started erect; but instead of seeking cover, he stood out in the full glow of the firelight, once more Lightfoot, the handsome war-chief of the Kickapoos. The footsteps came nearer—a light form turned the corner of the cabin, then paused, with a faint exclamation of surprise. Only for a moment; then the plump form was clasped tightly to the breast of the Indian scout, as he drew back into the deeper shadow.

Lightfoot forgot his mission, the peril he ran,

everything save the presence of the Indian maiden who yielded herself so freely to his warm embrace. Forgetful of all else, he poured soft words into her ears, for the moment acting like a true lover, no longer the cool, calculating warrior.

Feather-Cloud was the daughter of a Kickapoo sub-chief. She had won Lightfoot's love a year since, but the opposition of our friend to the tribal alliance prejudiced the old chief against him. That Feather-Cloud was now on a visit to some friends among the Osages, is all that need be said.

Though Lightfoot knew it not, jealous eyes were upon him. The rapturous meeting with Feather-Cloud had been witnessed by a young warrior, who was now creeping closer, his ear strained to catch their words. And he soon heard enough to know that an enemy had entered the village of his people.

The Kickapoo's first intimation of danger was in a shrill yell that rung out close behind him, and then a heavy form precipitated itself full upon his back. Staggered by the rude awakening as much as the shock, Lightfoot reeled and fell to the ground.

But his surprise was only momentary. Scarce had he touched the ground when all his faculties returned.

The Osage clutched his throat with suffocating force, his yell of alarm ringing through the village with startling distinctness, only to be taken up by a score of throats as the warriors sprung in a body toward the spot.

The sinewy hands of Lightfoot rose and clutched the throat of his antagonist, his fingers almost meeting in the yielding flesh, while the bones fairly seemed to give way beneath the enormous pressure. Quivering in every fiber, the Osage relaxed his grasp, and casting his enemy from him like a child, the Kickapoo sprang upon his feet, knife and tomahawk flashing in his nervous grip.

Not a moment too soon. From every quarter came the Osage warriors. Behind them flocked the squaws and children. All were yelling in confused chorus. It seemed a scene from Pandemonium.

Uttering his thrilling war cry, the outcast chief leaped forward, without awaiting the onset. With a motion rapid as thought, the heavy tomahawk fell; when it rose again it was stained a bright-red hue, and ruby drops fell from the once untarnished blade. Again and again it descended, now drinking the life-blood of an Osage, now parrying some deadly blow aimed at its wielder's life.

It was a thrilling sight to see that one man struggling against such fearful odds—fighting for liberty, for life! To see the blood-stained weapons flash in the weird flickering of the camp-fires; to hear the fatal blow, the half-stifled exclamation, as some keen weapon pierced the sensitive flesh; to see here a human form fall to the earth, perchance to rise no more, or else struggle to his feet and again plunge into the *melee*.

Fiercely, desperately Lightfoot fought, now out in the full glow of the firelight. At first his life had been aimed at, and despite his wondrous skill and celerity, more than one weapon had tasted his blood. But then the name of the outcast was echoed from lip to lip, and the cry arose to capture him for the torture-post.

Choosing rather to die at once, Lightfoot sprang upon the Osages with desperate fury, dealing his blows with lightning rapidity, leaving behind and around him a swath of dead and wounded. With superhuman strength, he slowly pressed through the cordon, and then, with one triumphant whoop, he cut down the last warrior that barred his road to freedom, and darted forward toward the friendly forest, where, once it was gained, he would be comparatively safe.

But even in the moment of triumph he was foiled. A boy flung himself in the way, clasp- ing the Kickapoo's legs with all his members—even biting at them like a bull-dog.

Lightfoot fell heavily to the ground. Before he could arise or regain the blood-stained weapons that were torn from his grasp by the fall, half a score of Osages were upon his back.

A confused struggle—then Lightfoot was lifted up, bound hand and foot. The Osage yell of triumph rung out loud and clear.

Lightfoot smiled grimly as he glanced around. He had carved his name in broad and deep letters upon their ranks. Their victory had been a costly one.

At this moment a cry came from the forest. The Osages answered it. A few minutes later, a considerable body of Indians—both Osages and Pottawatomies—entered the village. One

approached and spat in Lightfoot's face. It was the White Wolf—Seth Grable.

Making no reply, the Kickapoo glanced quickly around. A ferocious fire filled his eye as he caught a glimpse of a white woman being led into a cabin. In the firelight, her hair, floating loosely over her shoulder, shone with a golden gleam.

The savages gathered together, and the White Wolf addressed them in hot, forcibly words. Others followed him, the majority supporting his argument.

Lightfoot listened to them, his features composed and cold. Though his life swung in the balance, he appeared to take no interest in the matter.

Grable called for the outcast's immediate death—his death by the fire-torture. In answer to those who advocated delay until the entire tribe were assembled, he pointed out the great esteem—almost adoration—in which Lightfoot had been held by his tribe before his recent sentence, and hinted that the Kickapoos might interfere to save him, when the Osages who had fallen by the traitor's hand must go un-avenged.

This argument carried the day, and in the bloodthirsty yells of the savages Lightfoot read his doom.

The warriors who held him now securely bound him to a post, then hastened off to assist in the preparations for the torture. Lightfoot strained at his bonds with all the strength of his mighty muscles, but in vain. The bonds were too stout to break, too well applied to slip or come untied.

He saw the Osages collecting fuel and placing it round a post, at a little distance from where he was bound. Escape seemed impossible.

A figure shrouded in a blanket glided past him, a fold of the garment touching his person. Instinctively he glanced up. The figure abruptly turned and repassed him, uttering two words:

"Be ready."

The glance from a bright eye explained the meaning to the captive. The figure was that of Feather-Cloud. She was working for his life.

As though suspecting something of the kind, two braves came and stood beside him, watching the growing of the death-pile. The respite was rapidly shortening. Would Feather-Cloud be able to carry out her plan?

As this thought flashed through his mind, Lightfoot felt a gentle touch upon his arms where they passed around the post behind him. He was answered. The Indian maiden was even then at work, unsuspected by the warriors who stood by, within arm's length.

Lightfoot felt the bonds yield upon his feet, then upon his hands and arms. Something cold and firm was slipped between his fingers. One hand clutched the haft of a knife, the other that of a tomahawk.

The lips of Feather-Cloud touched his hands, and then she glided away. The time had come for action!

Like lightning the double blow fell—death-stricken, the Osage braves reeled back, uttering their quivering death-yells. Shrill and triumphant rung out the war-cry of the Kickapoo as he turned and darted toward the forest.

He was nearly clear of the village before the Osages recovered from their surprise. The pursuit was made, swift and instant.

From before the fugitive two bright flashes illumine the scene—two sharp reports break the air, and the pursuers falter as the death-missiles break their ranks.

But only for a moment—then they once more dart forward in deadly pursuit.

CHAPTER V.

SURROUNDED BY DEATH.

A SHRILL yell of exultation burst from Lightfoot's lips as he heard the death-shrieks behind him, and right deftly did he improve the advantage given him by the momentary hesitation of his pursuers, darting forward with the speed of a well-conditioned race-horse. It needed not the clear voice that shouted encouragement to him from out the gloom to tell him who were the daring marksmen. Lightfoot knew that Boone and Dare had ventured from the forest in order to create a diversion in his favor.

But the savages quickly recovered from the confusion these shots had thrown them into, and knowing—if only from there coming no other reports—the number of the enemy, rushed forward with augmented fury. Side by side the three scouts entered the woods; close after them the Indians, yelling like very fiends.

"Sep'rate—we'll meet you at the cave—by the river, chief," jerkily uttered Boone.

No reply was made, but Lightfoot abruptly veered to the left, while Boone and Dare ran on side by side.

All thought of caution was abandoned. The pursuers were too close for the fugitives to attempt dodging, or trying to lessen the noise of their crasping footsteps. So close were they that, when Lightfoot turned aside, the pursuers also divided, resolved to win their prey by stern, desperate racing.

For nearly a mile Lightfoot held his vantage with comparative ease, thridding the tangled forest with the skill and ease that none but a thorough woodsman can ever hope to attain. After that he came upon smoother traveling, breaking from the wood out upon a level, grassy tract of open ground, fully a mile in width.

The race, thus far, had not breathed the iron-limbed scout, though thoroughly warming him up, removing the soreness he had begun to feel from his wounds and bruises. And now as he entered the open, a clear, exultant cry broke from his lips, and inhaling a deep draught of the cool night-air, he bounded away over the level space with the liteness and agility of a deer.

With answering yells the Osages followed, straining every nerve to overtake Lightfoot before he should reach the further side. Swift of foot were they—some of them of wide renown—yet, foot by foot, the outcast chief left them behind.

Over two hundred yards in advance, Lightfoot plunged into the forest again, uttering a taunting cry that half-crazed his pursuers. It seemed as though his escape was fully assured—even the Osage braves began to despair of overtaking him.

And yet, even in the moment of his seeming triumph, an accident occurred that threatened to prove fatal to Lightfoot.

He had not run fifty yards after leaving the open when his foot struck a stub or projecting root, hurling him violently against a log. He lay as he had fallen, motionless, senseless, as if dead.

No longer yelling, but listening eagerly for the sound of footfalls, the savages rushed on, knowing that, by pausing to hearken, their last hope of overtaking the fugitives would be banished. On they dashed, scrambling over the fallen tree, brushing unconsciously past their senseless foe, even casting a shower of decaying leaves upon his body, so narrowly did they miss him.

For fully an hour Lightfoot lay there like one dead. But then consciousness gradually returned, and he struggled to a sitting posture, still clutching the limb that had broken short in his hand when he fell. Slowly recollection came to him, and he recalled the events of that night; but clearer than all these, a golden-haired woman stood out before his mental vision, appealing to him for assistance.

This thought seemed to put new life into his veins, and he sprang lightly to his feet. His brain throbbed violently, and he glided to the edge of the open ground, and peered keenly forth. Not a living soul was to be seen. The moon now shone clear and brightly. A stiff breeze was blowing. After a swift glance around, Lightfoot glided out from the shadow, and began recrossing the natural meadow.

He was returning to the Osage village!

It seemed a foolhardy act, but the chief firmly resolved to again enter the village, to rescue Yellow-hair, if it lay in his power. He felt assured that she was there—that the captive brought in by Seth Grable was none other than Edith Mordaunt.

He was not acting without due reflection. The deed would be easier on that night than any succeeding one, for several reasons. Nearly, if not quite all of the braves had set forth in pursuit of himself and friends. Even if not, they would scarce suspect a second attempt, after the first having so nearly proven fatal. Nothing would be further from their minds than that he would again venture into the village. For these reasons Lightfoot resolved to make the attempt. He had vowed eternal fidelity to Yellow-hair; he had abandoned his people because of her—he would save her from the White Wolf's fangs, though it should cost his life.

Across the meadow he glided. In this lay his greatest danger. It was not likely that the Osages had yet given over searching for him. Were any of them gazing out upon the meadow, they must see him.

Nearing the other side, he slackened his pace. When within arrow-shot, he turned abruptly to the right, and ran at full speed for several

hundred yards, then darted into the woods. By this move he hoped to escape any ambush that might have been laid for him. Yet no sound gave token that such was the case, as he hastened on through the forest.

Ten minutes later he stood gazing out upon the Osage village. The fires were still smoldering, a few forms could be seen, but the place was very quiet. Evidently the warriors had not yet returned.

There seemed little fear of his being discovered, but Lightfoot feared taking the time that must be consumed by crawling up to the log huts, and, crouching low down, he glided along in a circuit that would bring him up behind the corral. This he gained in safety, undiscovered; and then crept toward the village in the shadow cast by the rude fence.

Though he could plainly distinguish several braves sitting behind the smoldering fires, lazily smoking, Lightfoot gained the outer row of lodges unseen, even by the wolfish dogs that skulked round the village. Here he paused to locate more perfectly the cabin into which he had seen the captive maiden hurried. A few moments sufficed for this, but then a black frown corrugated his brow.

A fire smoldered before the cabin door. Beside it an Indian crouched; one of the smokers he had before noticed. Fate seemed conspiring against the bold Kickapoo, for while this guard remained on duty, he could not hope to accomplish his aim.

Lightfoot glanced keenly around. Only one other form met his eye—that of the second smoker. All others in the village appeared buried in slumber.

A determined expression settled over Lightfoot's face. He had decided. Too much had been dared to hesitate now. He might never again succeed in entering the village. He dared not risk delay, lest the lamb should be sacrificed to the lust of the wolf.

Prostrating himself, like a shadow he glided over the ground, nearing the cabin he felt assured contained Yellow-hair. The progress of a snake could not have been more noiseless. 'Twas the perfection of skill.

A moment more satisfied his doubts. In range with the guard, Lightfoot saw that a cabin hid the smokers from each other. Could he silence the one without attracting the attention of the other, he might succeed in freeing the captive. The risk was very great, yet he resolved to dare it.

At that moment he longed for his trusty bow. With it he could easily dispose of both these braves, without alarming the sleepers. And now he had only knife and tomahawk to depend upon.

Without alarm, he gained the cabin, then crawled to the corner. The fire was but a few feet from the door. A single leap would place him beside the drowsy guard. Yet he feared to risk it. A single cry—nay, a gasp—a groan would be sufficient to arouse the other watch, and then a whoop would alarm the sleepers. This Lightfoot reasoned as he silently moved out from the shadow into the light, a bright blade gleaming in his hand.

Slowly, silently, scarce perceptibly, a veritable shadow of death, the Kickapoo lessened the distance separating him from the drowsy sentinel. Nearer, still nearer until, with extended arm, he could have driven the long blade to the haft between the savage's shoulders. Yet the stroke was withheld.

Noiselessly Lightfoot drew himself together. Then his left arm was gradually extended. The moment was at hand.

The eye could scarcely follow his motions. His left hand closed like a seal upon the Indian's mouth, bearing him forcibly backward to meet the deadly blow dealt by the free hand. A peculiar *gritting* sound as the keen blade was pressed lower, was all.

And yet the sound met the ear of the second watcher, and Lightfoot heard a suspicious grunt as he arose from beside the fire. Discovery seemed inevitable, yet the Kickapoo did not seek safety in flight.

With a sudden movement he threw a corner of the dirty blanket over the wound, then crouched low down behind the corpse, supporting it in a lifelike position, peering out from beneath a corner of the blanket. He saw the savage step round the corner of a cabin, then pause, as if undecided. By the dim light he could not detect the blood that was slowly soaking through the blanket.

"Did you call?" he demanded, presently.

"No—I coughed, nothing more," promptly replied Lightfoot, suiting the action to the words.

As if satisfied, the Indian turned away. The Kickapoo smiled grimly. Noiselessly he removed the well-filled quiver from the dead brave's back, intending, with it and the bow that lay at his side, to prop the body in a lifelike position, to guard against suspicion, while he attempted the release of Yellow-hair.

But a new danger threatened the scout. As he worked, a dark form was gliding nearer and nearer, coming from behind, as though copying the example set by the Kickapoo.

Then it darted forward with a malignant sound, half-yelp, half-bark, its long fangs closing upon the spy's shoulder. It was a dog—one of those fierce, treacherous, slinking, skulking, wolfish curs that can only be found among the Indians.

An involuntary cry broke from Lightfoot's lips as he felt this attack, and he sprung to his feet, tearing the cur from its hold, crushing him to the ground with a force that snapped its bones like pipe-stems. The slain sentinel fell forward, the plumes and long hair igniting in the flickering blaze, sending up a bright, crackling flame.

A cry came from beyond, and Lightfoot glanced up. An Osage brave stood out in full view, evidently astounded by the scene. And then from the surrounding cabins came an increasing bustle that showed Lightfoot his peril.

Stooping, he caught up the bow and quiver. With wonderful adroitness the loop was fixed and an arrow notched. But, with another whoop, the Osage sprung behind the cabin.

Two catlike bounds carried Lightfoot to its corner. The Indian was hurriedly fitting an arrow to the string. 'Twas his last action in life; a sharp twang—a shrill yell; the Osage lay struggling in death-agonies, transfixed by the feathered shaft, and Lightfoot darted away toward the forest, with the speed of one who knew that life depended upon his exertions.

The village was aroused by the alarm; warriors hastily snatched up the nearest weapon and hastened into open air. The fires were smoldering, but the moon shone brightly.

A lithe figure darted past them with the speed of thought. Was it that of a friend, or of an enemy? Not until Lightfoot had passed the last cabin and rent the air with his shrill, taunting whoop, did they suspect the truth. But then pursuit was immediate. Burning with rage, they darted after the fleeing form. Twice that night had he bearded them—he should not live to boast of it. Were the Osage braves dogs that a degraded outcast should thus throw dirt in their faces! The deadly, vindictive yells answered *no*!

On Lightfoot dashed, a feeling of contempt for his pursuers banishing that of chagrin at his double failure. But gradually the fact of his being in danger forced itself upon him. He could hear the loud tramp of the Osages close at his heels as he dashed through the forest; could hear others spreading out by degrees upon either side to guard against his doubling upon them. Were these braves swifter than any he had before encountered? No. The change was in himself.

He was weakened by long toil and little rest; by the loss of blood as well. The arrow-shot in the thigh of the day before; the numerous but smaller hurts received in the furious *melee* at the village; the gash upon the head inflicted by his fall—all combined served to weaken his frame, to render his muscles less elastic. Every energy was brought into play, yet he ran heavily, with difficulty, far different from his usual light, springy leap.

Still on he fled, running for life, with the yelping hunters close upon his track. Through the forest, over the meadow, winding through steep hills or crossing them direct as the nature of the ground demanded; still on he fled, desperately holding his own, though unable to increase his brief advantage.

Still on, until an anxious look overspreads his face. The Osages yell with increased malignancy. The ground is comparatively open, now, and Lightfoot can see the folly of attempting to diverge from a straight course. The savages chase him in the shape of the new moon. Only in a direct course can he hope to escape them. And yet before him lies a trap. This knowledge calls up that look—this knowledge draws the yells of exultation from the lips of his pursuers.

Clinching his teeth tightly, the Kickapoo sprung forward with increased speed. Such a pace could not long be maintained, but he knows the end is close at hand. His fingers tighten on the bow—he brings the quiver round upon his breast. If the end is death, he will die as he lived—a terror to his enemies.

Across an open tract, he turned and glanced back. The Osages yelled loudly; they fancied him securely trapped. Sending back a yell of defiance, Lightfoot darted up the abrupt slope, forcing his way through the thicket of scrubby pines and cedars. Beyond this lay a few yards of open ground; then came empty space.

Leaping out Lightfoot knelt down, an arrow fitted to the string, another held between his teeth. Thus he waited the approach of the Osages.

He crouched upon the very brink of a precipice, at whose base, nearly one hundred feet below, roared the Osage river. Its surface was dark now, wrapped with shadows of the cliff, but the Kickapoo well knew how it looked as the sullen roaring came to his ears.

Plainly as though at mid-day he could see the swift current tearing madly along, dashing itself into spray over the sharp, jagged crests of scores of boulders that had, from time to time, dropped from the face of the cliff. The passage was not an easy one for a boat in broad daylight; what then would be the fate of a swimmer in midnight darkness—if one should leap down from the height above?

The Osages came on boldly enough, though they knew that, at bay, an awkward customer awaited them. But they had been sorely smitten that night—they thirsted for this man's blood with a vengeance that overpowered the fear of death.

As the first head showed above the thicket, the hunted outcast's bow twanged loudly, and a muffled yell, as the head sunk down, told how steady had been his nerves. Maddened to frenzy, the dead man's comrades leaped out upon the open, resolved to end all by one desperate rush. But another *twang* mingled with their cries—another dusky form reeled back, the death-yell dying out in his throat in a husky gurgle.

And then the hill was occupied by the Osages alone!

As he loosed the second death-winged arrow, Lightfoot turned and boldly sprung over the precipice, his wild war-cry sounding strangely thrilling as it soared up from the depths below. It ceased abruptly. Then came a peculiar sound. Was it the sullen plunge of a body into the water, or the dull *thud* of a human form striking flatly upon the jagged boulders that pierced the water's surface?

These questions asked the Osages. But not long did their indecision last. With eager cries they ran along upon the precipice-edge, making for a point where the river-bank was low. Dead or alive they resolved to recover the body of their terrible foe.

But Lightfoot was not dead. Besides the great distance, he had to run the risk of falling upon some of the immense boulders, which, in the gloom, were invisible. Knowing this, he yet retained his presence of mind, and though expecting death to follow, leaped for life.

Straight down, feet foremost he descended, one hand clutching the arrow in his quiver, though with arm pressed close to his side. Striking the water with almost stunning force, he sunk until his feet struck bottom with a force that doubled him up in a ball. But then he shot up, springing half-out of the water, half-stunned, bewildered, confused, but alive!

With barely consciousness to keep afloat, he made no effort to avoid the rocks. And perhaps 'twas as well, for the current carried him through the perilous passage in safety, though more than once the sharp, knife-like edges of the flinty rock cut through his skin.

Then the river-bed widened, and the stream flowed more quietly. Lightfoot had partially recovered from the stunning shock, and now swam rapidly on, bearing above the sullen roar of the waters, the yells of the Osages upon the bank above. He easily divined their purpose, but felt little doubt that he could balk it.

As the bank grew lower, he was forced to keep close in to the shore to avoid the moonlighted space beyond, and the race was so close that he could hear the rapid tread of the Osages as they rushed toward this point. Still he passed the danger in safety, and then turning upon his back he glanced back. Several Indians were already in the water, eagerly looking for some trace of their enemy. Grimly smiling, Lightfoot swam on, little heeding his aching bones.

Half a mile below, he reached the ford, mention of which has so frequently been made in this story. As he stood erect in the shallow water an acute pain ran through his left leg, and he fell forward. A quick examination told him the truth. His ankle was badly sprained; so severely that further flight was not to be

thought of. To save his life he could not have walked a half-mile.

Then Boone's parting words flashed upon his mind, naming the cave by the river as the rendezvous. It was possible that his comrades were even then awaiting his coming.

Sinking down in the water Lightfoot swam toward the entrance, uttering as he did so a signal often made use of between himself and the Wood King. But no reply came; again, with the same result. He knew then that the old hunter had not arrived, and, despite his own danger, a thrill of pain agitated his mind. He had learned to almost worship the noble-hearted woodsman.

Swimming into the cavern, Lightfoot crawled upon the sandy beach, half-fainting from pain and exhaustion. His labor that night had been really Herculean.

But then he turned and peered out upon the river that lay half in darkness, half-revealed by the silvery moonlight. He gave a start and dashed the dripping hair from his eyes. Two black dots were visible upon the surface. Then two human forms reared themselves upright, standing in the shoal water. They were Indians—Osage warriors. Their object was plain. They had swam down here to intercept their foe's escape, if alive, to secure his scalp if his dead body should float down the river.

Lightfoot frowned deeply and felt of his weapons, for the darkness rendered eyesight useless. The bow was stiff strung, though the string was somewhat lax, from being water-soaked. Rubbing this forcibly, he succeeded in rendering it fit for use. The quiver still retained its arrows; the girdle at his waist still supported the hatchet and knife given him by the faithful Feather-Cloud. Again he smiled grimly. Though crippled, he could yet make a stern fight for life.

But then a new thought struck him. He would avoid the fight if possible; and the tree above offered him the means of hiding until all search was over, as he believed.

Along the cave floor he crawled, reaching the hollow tree with difficulty. Creeping inside, he loosened enough of the decayed wood to cover up the entrance, then clutching the grape-vine, dragged himself up to the mouth of the hollow. Ensnaring himself securely among the dense boughs, he drew up the vine, coiling it beside him. And then, utterly exhausted, he sunk into a sort of stupor, for it could scarcely be called sleep.

This stupor lasted until the sun was up, and was then only broken by a shout from below. Bewildered, half asleep, he listened. Voices came to his ear up through the hollow tree. He knew then that the cave had been searched while he slept, and that the enemy had discovered the passage he had used. And then he saw what a fatal accident his sudden awaking had caused.

His start had dislodged the coiled grape-vine, so that it fell down into the hollow trunk. And now it became taut, jerking from side to side as an Indian tried to drag himself up. Desperate, Lightfoot drew his hatchet, and at one stroke severed the vine. A muffled yell came up from below, then a heavy fall, followed by shrill cries of triumph as the Osages discovered the cleanly-severed vine. They had found their prey.

Instinctively Lightfoot clutched his bow and started to descend the outside of the tree. But a twinge of pain reminded him that escape by flight was useless. And then a yell from the hillside below called his attention to a number of Osages running up to surround the tree.

Coolly the Kickapoo waited until the savages were within a score yards of the trunk, then his bow sent a feathered shaft deep into the breast of the foremost brave. Startled, the survivors broke for cover, but another missile overtook them, and Lightfoot yelled defiantly as another victim was added to the heavy price demanded for his life.

For a time all was still. Not an Indian could be seen; not a missile was discharged at the Kickapoo, though his position could be fairly defined. Once their chiefs had doomed Lightfoot to the stake; now they resolved that a similar death should be his.

A whiff of smoke came curling up the hollow shell. Lightfoot drew back. The Osages yelled madly. The sport was fairly begun. How would it end? How could it end but in the death of the hard-hunted outcast!

Thicker and more dense grew the smoke. A dull, sullen roaring was audible as the flames entered the shell, eating greedily into the rotten wood. The leaves began to shrivel and turn black. The intense heat drew great beads of per-

spiration from the skin of the Kickapoo. The forked flames shoot out of the hollow top. Still further back draws the outcast, now fully exposed upon a limb. His hair begins to shrivel, his flesh to crack. His torture is excruciating, yet he, with a defiant shout, echoes back the yells of the Osages.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BOWLING BULLETS.

STEADILY Boone pressed on through the tangled forest, with the yells of the Osage warriors ringing clearly in his ears, and something of the fire of his younger days gleamed in his blue eyes and brought a flush to his bronzed cheek, as he felt himself once more pitted against the dusky heathen who had dealt him so many and bitter blows.

Close in his footsteps trod young Abel Dare, sullenly fleeing from the enemies he longed to turn upon and rend in his furious hatred. But the Wood King had gained a strange ascendancy over his mind, and he obeyed, though with an ill grace.

At the time he had given the word to separate, Boone diverged slightly to the right hand, bidding Dare follow him closely. And now they sped forward over the tangled ground with all the speed possible, while the Osages yelled like eager bounds close at his heels.

Thoroughly acquainted with the surrounding country, Boone sought to direct his course so as to avoid a serious obstacle that lay before them; but even under the best auspices it is difficult to keep a straight course through a thick wood; little wonder then that their rapid flight through the darkness caused him to err in his calculations.

Half an hour after leaving the Osage village, the veteran made this discovery, and a feeling of anxiety agitated his mind, more for the young man, who trusted in his skill and experience, than for himself. As was the case with Lightfoot, a few hours later, he was running headlong into a trap. Nor could he hope to shun it by turning aside. The pursuers were too near for that.

Then a cry burst from his lips. Like a revelation, there flashed upon him a scene from the past: a deep, narrow gorge, yet too wide for a man to cross it by leaping—a hunter standing upon the verge, peering downward, supporting himself by a stout grape-vine that dangled from the horizontal limb of the gnarled elm tree. By its aid an active man could cross the ravine.

Calling upon Dare to increase his exertions, Boone darted forward with the speed of a hunted deer through the now less dense forest. The trees grew less thickly, the ground more broken, strewn with flinty bowlders. Through the clear moonlight could be seen distant hills rising darkly, with their covering of trees, or bleak and bare, their rocky summits scarce affording subsistence for a scant growth of shriveled, prematurely-growing grass.

True to his latter calculation, the Wood King reached the gorge at a point only a few steps from the vine-wreathed elm tree, and then one stroke of his keen knife severed the pendent grape-vine close to its root. Clutching this, he ran back a few paces, crying out to Dare, as he did so:

"Watch me, lad—then follow. Ketch the vine as it comes back."

Then springing from the ground, he shot swiftly through the air, across the dark ravine, safely making the further side, whence he hurred back the novel rope. The yells of the Osages came more clear—their heavy tramp smote his ear, and Dare did not hesitate for a moment. Clutching the vine, he too was safely landed on the other side, where Boone was hurriedly driving home a well-battered bullet.

"What shall we do with this?" muttered Dare, still holding the vine.

"Let it go. 'Tain't long enough to tie, an' we cain't break it off. We kin keep 'em from crossin' with our rifles. Take to kiver, an' load up—for life!" hastily replied the Wood King, kneeling down in the shade cast by a huge bowlder, adroitly priming his rifle as he spoke.

With loud cries, the Osages rushed forward, but then paused, their tones altering greatly. Where were their anticipated victims? The swaying grape-vine answered, and so did the rifle of the old hunter.

Sharply, with a spiteful cadence, rung out its voice, the bright flame leaping half-way across the ravine, dazzling the eyes of the Osages; the eyes of all but one—and he sunk down in death, the blood gushing from a perforated skull. For a moment the savages stood amazed; then turned and sought cover. But before the friendly bowlders were gained, though so near at hand,

the rifle of the young settler was discharged, and a second savage fell at full length, sorely wounded. A single cry of agony, then he silently dragged his maimed body over the rocky ground, seeking to gain cover.

"Now's our chance," said Abel, as he poured the wonderful black grains into his rifle. "We can get to a safe distance before they think of crossing."

"Easy, lad," and Boone laughed silently. "Thar's plenty of time afore us. The varmints won't ventur' to cross over as long's they think two sech rifles as ours is ready to dispute their passage, so we may as well get a little more breath while we kin. There—hear them yelp!" he added, as two or three subdued cries came from the opposite side. "The fools—do they think to blind the eyes of one who has known them a lifetime? Poor fools—they're sadly out."

"What do you mean?" quickly asked Abel Dare.

"This: they're yellin' there to make us think they're very busy hatchin' some plan to git at us, and so keep us still a-watchin' to drive 'em back when they try to cross. Now, though layin' bets is not my natur', I stake my scalp ag'in' that of any red heathen among 'em, that the biggest part of the lot has gone round the ravine so's to take us unbeknown in the 'rear,'" quietly replied the veteran woodsman.

"Then why stay here, losing precious time that—"

"As I told you, to git ready for another hard tramp. It's full half a mile to the nearest end or crossin'-place, and the ground is mighty rough. But we'll go now."

As he spoke, Boone raised his rifle and fired at one of the bowlders beyond, though none of the savages were visible. Taunting yells greeted this shot, but he knew that his object was gained. The Osages would believe that the scouts had resolved to defend the pass, and so would make no attempt at crossing until their friends completed the surround. And this, Boone felt, would give them ample time to reach safety.

Loading his rifle, as he proceeded, Boone led the way over the rocks, after crawling stealthily until beyond view of the ravine. Abel, comparatively inexperienced in such matters, chafed restlessly at the deliberate motions of the old hunter but knew the uselessness of remonstrating. Thus they proceeded for fully half an hour, when from the direction of the ravine, there came, borne upon the brisk breeze, angry yells of rage and disappointment. The Osages had discovered the flight of their enemies.

"Now, lad, sence we've got our new wind, mebbe it'd be as well to do a little more tall travelin', for we've a long trail afore us to the place I told the chief we'd meet him at," said Boone, breaking into a trot.

For half a mile more Abel kept close at the veteran's heels, but then his foot slipped, and in recovering his balance, the knife dropped from his belt. A little incident, but one that was fated to produce important changes in the lives of both the scouts.

Picking up the weapon, Abel thrust it securely into his belt, then resumed his course. Boone had not heard the slip, and now Abel just caught a glimpse of his form as he passed around a huge bowlder. When Abel gained this point, Boone had disappeared around another. Expecting with every moment to overtake the hunter, Dare pressed on through the broken country. The trail was winding and intricate, one among a hundred others, though this fact the young settler was hardly aware of, since the moon was already paling before the approach of day, and a dim, uncertain light shrouded the earth, revealing outlines vague and indistinct.

For several minutes Abel Dare pressed on with as great speed as was practicable under the circumstances; still nothing was to be seen or heard of Boone. Then pausing, he called aloud, gently at first, then louder; but only the mocking echoes answered back. Where could the hunter be?

For a few minutes Dare deliberated whether or no he should retrace his steps and try to rejoin his friend; but he felt by no means sure that he *could* do this, so many passages and trails seemed winding through this rocky tract. And then, too, he knew that the Osages would be searching for the fugitives. To return would be to rush into their arms.

"No, I'll go on," he at length muttered, decisively. "This tract can not extend much further, and once in the open ground, I can easily manage to rejoin Boone. If not, then I'll strike for the settlements and try to raise

enough men to set poor, darling Edith free, whether or no!"

Acting upon this resolve, Abel Dare turned his face toward the north, and pressed on at a rapid gait, all unconscious of the danger that was rapidly nearing him—that, in fact, he was advancing to meet.

For an hour more he toiled on. The ground was now almost like a rolling prairie, thinly wooded save in the deeper valleys where some small creek sluggishly wound its way. The sun had risen, clear and bright. The wind had nearly died away. The day was lovely, inspiring, and despite his weary limbs, his hunger, the young settler pursued his way with a free, springy step.

He had seen nothing of Boone, though he had searched keenly, had hallooed, once even discharging his rifle, but all without the result wished for. Not daring to waste further time in the hope of finding him, Dare turned his face toward the quite distant settlement, eager to put into operation his plans for the rescue of Edith. For that she was still alive and a captive, he firmly believed, from the reasonings of the old hunter.

His mind was filled with such thoughts, when, upon the ridge of a considerable hill, Abel abruptly paused. Upon his left, fully half a mile distant, his keen glance detected a score human figures, crossing the hill in an opposite direction to that followed by himself. For this reason he had not discovered them before.

Quick as thought Abel flung himself flat upon the ground, but he was too late to avoid observation. He saw the human figures turn toward him, gesticulating violently. Even as he lay they could see him, for the grass was short and scanty.

Whatever doubts he might have entertained as to their identity, were quickly solved. The bright sun shone clearly upon them. Even at that distance he could distinguish the long-flowing hair, the plumed heads, the bronze, naked forms; all telling of savages, and consequently enemies.

Feeling assured that naught save another horrible, heart sickening flight could avail him here, Abel partially arose and cast a swift glance behind him. In that direction, if any, must he flee, for in his present jaded state he would need all the advantage he possessed.

Fully two miles away a considerable sized hill arose from the level ground around. Though its crest was densely crowned with trees, the sides and base were bare of vegetation, an uneven, dirty grayish cast. Around its base lay scattered a number of boulders that must be, to be so distinctly visible at that distance, of large size. The thought flashed upon Dare that if he could not find a secure covert there, at least he could gain a position from whence he could sell his life dearly.

He had time for no more than one glance and its accompanying thought. Though in silence, the Indians rapidly advanced along the ridge toward him. Leaping to his feet, Abel turned and darted away at full speed, casting a quick glance over his shoulder as he did so. That showed him the savages bounding forward in hot pursuit, while their yells came slowly to his ears.

With eyes fixed upon the goal, Dare ran, as he had never ran before, along the gradually-descending ridge. The turf was smooth, springy, free from all obstacles. A more favorable spot for a race could not have been picked out. And yet Abel knew that the savages were gaining upon him, though slowly. The difference in the occasional yells plainly told him that. Still, when one-half the distance had been traversed, he glanced back, and felt assured that, barring accident, he would not be overtaken before reaching the hill.

On—the competitors sped. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the distance separating them lessened. But then the rocky mound now loomed up quite near, and Abel could plainly distinguish the irregular seams and fissures in its surface. Surely, in some of these he could find a refuge? Hope sprang up anew in his heart, though he knew that he must round the point of the hill before attempting to secrete himself, if he wished to make the attempt successful, and every additional yard to be run was adding to the task already sufficiently arduous.

Panting heavily, his limbs trembling, his brain madly throbbing, Abel Dare gained the foot of the hill. Still he did not pause, even to glance back at his pursuers, but pressed on round the point at full speed. Yelling madly the savages dashed on after him, knowing that the end was nigh by his uncertain strides.

A little stream of water was before Abel, and

a wild, whimsical thought was called up by it. Skirting the hill-base, he came upon what seemed the source of the stream, where the water, clear, sparkling and cold, came gushing through a round black hole, as though from the bowels of the rocky mound. Here Abel paused, dropping upon his hands and knees, plunging his head in the water, swallowing great mouthfuls of the grateful liquid.

"At any rate, I'll not die thirsting," was his thought, and regardless, as it seemed, of the rapidly approaching enemy, he acted upon the idea.

But this was only momentary. Scarce had he touched the water, when he started. A clear, wild-sounding laugh filled his ear, apparently coming from the empty air above his head. And following the laugh came these words:

"Does the hunted deer halt to appease his thirst or hunger while the wild wolves snarl at his heels? Go learn wisdom from the dumb beasts. Up, man! up and away—the blood-thirsty leathens are upon ye!"

Thus directed, Abel Dare's eyes rested upon a tall, wild-looking figure, standing upon a sort of projecting platform, half-way up the hill. It was the same being who had warned the Mordaunt family of their danger—the being sometimes called "the hermit"—oftener the devil, by the settlers. Now for the first time, Abel beheld his face, though more than once, during his hunting experience, he had caught a fleeting glimpse of the rudely-dressed being.

But the one glance was all that Dare gave him now, for from round the hill-point came another series of yells from the pursuing savages, now close at hand. Yet in that glance Abel noted a rude, faintly defined path leading up the precipitous hillside, ending at the platform where stood the hermit. It could be scaled by an active man.

Without pausing to consider whether such a course would be agreeable to the hermit, Abel sprang forward, clambering up the smooth trail with the agility of a cat. A peculiar cry broke from the hermit's lips, and he retreated from sight. Almost immediately Abel heard him rolling a heavy boulder toward the point directly above him. At the same moment loud, eager cries from the ground below told that the savages had rounded the hill-point, and had discovered him.

A double peril seemed threatening him, yet, spurred on by the malignant whoops, Abel scrambled on and upward. Directly above his head hung a large, jagged boulder, poised upon the edge of the platform by the strong arms of the hermit. To the young man, a look of devilish triumph seemed dawning in the big black eyes that peered down upon him over the top of the boulder.

"Quick! the heathen are beginning to bethink themselves of their weapons. Reach me your hand—baste! Is life so worthless that ye would cast it away without an effort toward saving it?" cried the man, in tones so different from that first used that even Abel felt surprise.

Still, great though that surprise was, increased, too, by finding a friend when he had expected to meet an enemy, it did not prevent Dare from obeying the hermit by extending his hand, which was clutched by fingers like iron in their strength. Without any apparent effort the hermit drew Abel Dare up over the escarpment, landing him safely by his side, though now the rifles from below had begun to speak, the bow-strings to twang, and the feathered shafts to hurtle through the air. But the marksmen were unsteady by their long race, and their aim any thing but accurate.

"Give them a taste of your metal, young man—take those with the rifles," sharply cried the hermit, seemingly charged from a wild enthusiast into a cool Indian-fighter.

Abel, nowise loth, obeyed. A savage dropped to the ground, writhing in agony. The hermit shook his head and frowned.

"You overshot—at least two inches too high. 'Tis better, even in dealing with such reptiles, to do your work neatly. But now hold this rock, while I go and get my arms. Your shot cocked them for a time."

In a few moments the hermit returned, bearing in his hand a huge bow of second-growth white-oak, full six feet in length, more resembling a crow-bar, tapering slightly at both ends, than weapon to be used by human arm. Besides this he carried a skin quiver filled with long, flint-tipped arrows. Abel's eyes opened widely as he saw with what ease the hermit bent this bow, to test the string. But soon they had their hands full.

In silence a number of Indians broke cover and darted toward the narrow path leading up-

ward, while a volley from those remaining concealed swept the platform. Crouching low down the two defenders coolly watched their movements, comparatively well shielded the while.

Half a dozen braves succeeded in scaling the path for fully half the distance, when, with a sudden push, the hermit toppled over the heavy boulder. True to his intention, it dashed along the hollow trail, and tore resistlessly through the line of savages, crushing, mangling them horribly, leaving but one alive of the six, and as he picked himself up at the hill-foot, the huge bow was bent, and then an arrow passed entirely through the poor devil's body.

The savages yelled madly from their cover, but not one ventured to show himself. The hermit laughed loudly, then turned to Abel, who pale and staring, was gazing over the platform:

"How do you like my style of working? But go and get some more of our jolly flint bullets—you'll find them yonder, in the cave behind you."

Awe-stricken, Dare rose to his feet to obey, but then paused as though transfixed. Then a joyous look overspread his face, and he sprang forward, crying:

"Edith, my darling! alive thank God!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE WHITE WOLF SHOWS HIS FANGS.

With a low, glad cry the maiden sprang forward and was clasped tightly to the breast of her lover, whose eager lips rained hot kisses upon her face; for it was indeed Edith Mordaunt—Yellow-hair. It was a rapturous meeting, so unexpected. For a time their speech was broken, inarticulate.

The hermit turned his head at the cry, and now stared at the young couple in seeming surprise. As if by magic the old half-wild, half-vacant expression came back to his face. One hand pressed his brow with an impatient gesture, as he partially raised himself. A sharp, spiteful report rung out from below, and a few threads of the iron-gray locks fell upon his breast, severed by the passage of the renegade's bullet. This seemed to break the spell that bound him, and the hermit sunk back, saying, carelessly:

"So you know the lady, then?"

"Know her—But tell me, Edith, has this man dared to—"

"No, he has treated me kindly—I believe I owe him my life," quickly replied the maiden.

"There, young man, let that knowledge satisfy you for a few moments—at least until you can roll me out two or three such playthings as we used a moment since. Then you can ask the lady what questions you will. One man can easily hold this pass, though a tribe should attack it."

The cool, quiet tone of the hermit acted like magic upon the young borderer, and he obeyed without question. Just within the mouth of the cave he could distinguish at least half a score of the flinty boulders, and several of these he managed to roll to the side of the hermit, who was once more watching the movements of the enemy below. Though they had not fled, the savages did not appear anxious to renew the assault after such an overwhelming reception.

Together the young couple seated themselves just within the mouth of the cavern, side by side, hand in hand, conversing eagerly, but saying very little, yet repeating that little over and over again, which seems to be a trait peculiar to lovers after a certain point. Yet, despite these interruptions and digressions, Edith managed to tell her story, which may be briefly summed up.

The hermit was abroad on that fatal night, under the influence of what may be termed a crazy fit, since he could remember nothing that had transpired after the spell was gone. In it he had warned the Mordaunt family of approaching peril; in it, when he heard the firing of rifles, the shrill yells of savages, together with the shrieking of women, he rushed to the scene of death. An Indian was bearing the struggling form of a woman in his arms. One stroke of his clinched fist felled the savage senseless, and seizing the sinking form, he fled through the raging storm, instinctively seeking his hill retreat. The cold, driving wind beating upon the maiden's upturned face, soon restored her to her senses, though still sadly confused and bewildered. A flash of lightning revealed to her affrighted gaze the stern, wild face of the one who bore her so swiftly through the forest. To her then it seemed the face of a very demon. She strove to shriek aloud for help, but in vain. A horrible dread chained her tongue.

What followed was indistinct and dim, until she awoke with a new day, though its light shone but dimly, into the place where she was resting. The hermit crouched at her feet, gazing upon her with a puzzled air. The crazy spell was broken; he was rational now. But the events of the past night were buried in oblivion, so far as his memory was concerned. Wonder was plainly written upon his features; how came this fair maiden in his wild retreat?

Seeing that Edith was awake, he eagerly questioned her, and then, from his own knowledge of his occasional madness, the hermit read the riddle. He pledged himself to protect and safely restore the maiden to her friends, at the earliest moment consistent with her safety. And there was something in his words and actions that told Edith she might trust him implicitly.

The voice of the hermit was now heard without, and Abel hastened to learn what was the matter. The young settler started, a deep flush suffusing his face as he heard a voice sounding from the plains below—a voice that he recognized for that of a dastardly villain—the voice of Seth Grable, the White Wolf!

"You mought as well give in, fust as last," Grable said, "fer thet's bound to be the eend. I know you've got a snug kiver, as you say; but it kin be taken; an' we've jest got the fellows to take it, too. You see'd the Injuns thet kem up jest now. Thar's more'n a hundred braves here who take my word fer law. Ef I say the word, up they go, though you rub out the biggest half. But I don't want to say so. Why? Easy told. You've got a gal up thar thet I've swore must be my squaw. She'd be shore to git rubbed out in the muss. Thet's why I offer ye terms."

"What terms can a dirty scoundrel like Seth Grable, the renegade, have to offer honest men?" said Abel Dare, standing boldly out into view, his rifle half-poised.

"Them's rough words o' yours, Abe Dare," returned Grable, his voice trembling with ill-suppressed passion; "but they don't do no harm, a'ter all. What terms? Jest these. Give up peace'bly, 'ith-out makin' no more fuss, and I promise you your lives. O' course you'll be kept pris'ners, but mebbe you kin buy your freedom some time."

"A clumsy lie—a disgrace even to an idiot like you, Seth Grable. But here's our answer. If you want us, come and take us—if you can," laughed Abel, sinking down in time to avoid several arrows that hurtled near.

Then once more all became quiet. The savages remained hidden behind the rocky breastworks. The hermit lay upon the platform, his bow in hand, the bowler beside him ready to be hurled down the hollow trail in case the enemy should dare another onset. Abel retreated to the side of his loved one, and they conversed earnestly, yet sorrowfully, for the death of their friends pressed heavily upon their hearts.

Grable had spoken no more than the truth when he admitted the position was a strong one. Indeed it appeared impregnable. The hill stood alone in the center of a plain, bare and treeless save at the very summit, and from it the ledge was hidden. For a few yards from the top the rocks sloped abruptly down; then came a perpendicular descent of full fifty feet, ending in a broad, table-like ledge that overhung the mouth of the hermit's retreat. Only by a swaying rope from above could the ledge be gained, and then, standing in the cave entrance, those below would be hidden. The trail leading up from the plain below was narrow, hollowed out of the rock, barely affording room for one person to ascend at a time. This was the only avenue of approach from that direction.

Truly, it was well said; a strong position. Slowly the hours rolled by. All was silent save the voices of nature. The savages seemed to have disappeared. The hermit lay upon the rock motionless as though dead. A vacant expression rested upon his face. He was brooding over the past, all-unconscious of the net that was fast closing around him.

Suddenly something whizzed through the air, followed by a double *cluck*, sharp and peculiar. A cry broke from the hermit's lips as he rolled over upon his back. The long locks of gray hair were fast darkening with blood. A couple of headless arrows lay beside him; their flinty heads had been shivered to atoms upon the hard rock.

At the cry Abel sprang to his feet, rifle in hand. He saw the blood—he believed the hermit was dead, so motionless did he lay. But then came a rapid change.

The hermit's arms were uplifted, bending the long bow until the notched shaft touched his ear. Then it was loosed—its swift passage baffling human eyesight.

A cry—a shrill, blood-curdling shriek of mortal agony—came from above. And then a dark form shot headlong down through the air, striking with a sickening *thud* upon the rocky ledge, crushed into a shapeless mass, bespattering the trio with clotted blood and brains.

Wild and taunting rung out the laugh of the hermit as he sprang to his feet, shaking his weapon at the savages upon the plain. Their cries of rage and hatred caused the rocky mound to echo again. And then a score of arrows and rifle bullets passed the shelf, pattering against the flinty wall beyond. With another laugh, the hermit leaped back unharmed.

"You are wounded?" anxiously cried Abel Dare.

"A scratch—nothing more," was the quiet reply. "But the time is come now. Those devils mean mischief. They hold the ledge above, and next time will take better aim. But they can't touch us in here. All we have to do now is to watch and pick off the devils as they show themselves at the head of the path you came up by."

Truly a narrow escape had been his. One of the arrows had grazed his neck, cutting through the skin over the jugular vein. The other had passed between his arm and side, marking them both with a livid welt. Considering the position they were forced to assume, and firing directly downward, the wonder was that the Indians had made such good shots, and that they missed being fatal.

"Then, you think they will attempt to force their way up that—"

"I'm certain of it. They know our strength now, and they dare not retreat—their tribe would disgrace them if they let two men foil them. No, depend upon it, they'll give us work enough—and not work at that."

"God grant that we may be able to hold our own! Not for myself," Abel hastily answered the hermit's keen glance, "but for her. She is all I have left on earth now."

"Then you—you are an orphan? Your mother is—"

"Dead. But whether my father lives or no, I cannot tell. I can remember nothing of him but what my mother told me. On her death-bed she bade me seek him, nor rest satisfied until I had found him, either living or in his grave. If living, to give him her forgiveness for the great wrong he had done her. But why do I tell you this? It cannot interest you—a stranger."

"It does—deeply. Perhaps because you are a friend. Tell me more—about her. Perhaps I can give you some clue."

"Hush! Is not that the scratching sound of feet upon the trail?" hastily whispered Abel, bending his ear.

"Yes—the devils are coming. I will take the first one that shows his head—you the second. Remember—waste no shot."

Kneeling in the mouth of the cave, the two men silently awaited the appearance of their enemies. The rifle was leveled, the long bow half-bent. And the scratching noise sounded more distinct.

Then the black muzzle of a rifle crept noiselessly over the escarpment. The hermit smiled. The guess was a poor one. The bullet would strike two feet to the left.

The rifle cracked. As though believing the smoke-cloud would screen them, the savages uttered their war-cry, and sprang up to gain the ledge.

The hermit laughed aloud. As the foremost figure appeared in view, the strong bow was bent—then the shaft leveled. Striking fairly, the broad, muscular breast, the missile passed entirely through, falling upon the plain far beyond the mound. Clutching, tearing convulsively at the wound, the Indian, with the terrible yell almost universally given by his race, fell heavily backward.

At the same instant Abel Dare fired, the flame from his rifle blackening the face of the second savage whose skull was crushed in. The fall of these two bodies checked the advance of their comrades, and gave the hermit time to deal the finishing stroke by a daring deed.

Dropping his weapon, he rushed forward, heedless of the yelling fiends upon the ledge above, and seizing upon one of the large bowlers, fairly raised it from the ground, and dashed it down upon the struggling savages. Two arrows struck the rock by his side, one of them tearing through his garments, but he did not hesitate. Stooping, he seized a second rock. An arrow struck him, and he fell to the platform. A yell of devilish triumph rung out from the savage marksmen above. But their exultation was premature.

With an angry cry, almost mad, the hermit struck the bowler with his hands, rolling it over like a feather-weight, sending it down the hollow trail to complete the work its fellow had so terribly begun. Another arrow splintered its flinty head beside him, but uttering another cry, he scrambled back to the mouth of the cave, well knowing that the trail was once more clear of savages.

Anxiously Abel bent over him. A long arrow was sticking deep in his back, buried half its length in the flesh. It seemed impossible for the wound to be other than mortal. But the hermit smiled grimly.

"Don't be alarmed, lad; I've fought down harder blows than this. I don't think it went deep enough to kill—you see it's only through my side. Cut off the feathers, and push it through. I feel the point pricking the skin."

In silent amazement Abel obeyed, and then the blood-stained arrow was cast aside. While thus engaged, the wounded man had torn a bit of cloth from the young settler's shirt, and after chewing it hastily, pressed it into the orifice; another bit closed the second, and then he staggered to his feet, cutting a broad strip from his clothes.

"This will do for a bandage. Tie it hard and tight."

Abel tore the sleeve from his shirt, making two pads, which he placed over the wounds, then drawing the broad strip of buckskin around the hermit's body as tightly as possible, secured it firmly. By this time the strange being had apparently recovered. As he said, the wound had in a manner paralyzed the muscles of his body, though only momentarily.

Edith had been a pale and trembling witness of all this, crouching just within the cave. Death seemed inevitable when the stern onset was made, but now she breathed a prayer of thanksgiving that they all were yet safe.

The repulse had been bloody in the extreme, and the loss of the Indians had been very severe. Yet it seemed only to increase their resolution to conquer. As the hermit said, they would never be beaten by two men. And now, though in silence, they were again advancing to the spot of death.

A dark line cautiously broke upon the grayish-white edge of the rock, rising noiselessly higher, until a pair of eyes glared strangely toward the defenders.

A faint cry from Edith called their attention, then following the direction indicated by her trembling finger, they discovered the head of a savage slowly rising above the ledge. Quick as thought, Abel lunged forward his rifle and fired, just as the hermit cried:

"Don't shoot—it's a trick—they're shoving up a dead man to draw our fire!" and then he clutched the bow and notched an arrow to the string.

As the rifle-shot rung out, a cry of triumph broke from the lips of the savages, and the corpse that

had availed them so well was cast aside, while in quick succession they sprang upon the ledge. They believed the game was in their own hands now, for the marksmen above had telegraphed them the fall of the hermit, and now that the other's rifle was empty, a single rush would end all.

But the first one whose foot touched the ledge bounded backward, yelling convulsively, a feathered shaft quivering deep in his skull. He fell half-way down the hill, but to one side of the trail, that was now densely crowded with yelling warriors, rushing to the ledge above.

Like living shadows the yelling red-skins leaped upon the narrow ledge, the bright blades of their brandished weapons gleaming in the sunlight. Twice in rapid succession the hermit's bow twanged sharply, the death-note of as many screeching fiends.

Again the weapon was bent—but the wielder staggered forward, as, with a sullen sound, the frayed string snapped in twain, the arrow dropping useless to the ground. It seemed as though all was over, for Abel Dare was just ramming home a bullet. Before he could withdraw the rod the enemy would be upon them bodily.

All this had occurred with the rapidity of thought. The red-skins had not yet recovered from the surprise given them by being confronted with one whom they supposed dead.

Recovering himself, the hermit, still clutching the bow, sprang back and raised Edith in his arms, crying for Abel to follow them quickly, then darted into the darkness of the cave. Hard upon his heels trod the young settler, while, recovering from their momentary confusion, the Osages dashed after the fugitives with blood-curdling yells.

But the limble-footed savages were too fleet for the fleeing trio, and the hermit, panting from exertion and growing weakness, exclaimed to Dare:

"I'll have to give in. There is but one thing to do. You go on through the passage, leave the girl and me—I'll see that no harm comes to her—and make your way out of the other end of the passage. There you'll be in the open country, and if you are spy you can bring the settlers down to help us. It's the only way. Go at once, or we all perish here together."

Abel hesitated. What, leave Edith? She guessed the thought.

"Go, Abel. I feel that it is the only way to save me. Do as our friend suggests. Get the settlers or Lightfoot on the trail, and all will yet be well."

"I will go! God forgive me if any ill happens to you!" and he disappeared in the darkness.

The savages, led by the renegade, were soon up with the old man and his charge, and came down on them with the fierceness of tigers. Their leader, however, interposed to save the fugitives from slaughter; he had other designs upon them than to permit the old hermit an easy death.

The captives were led backward to the outer world again, and then on toward the Indians' late camp, around whose still burning fire the party gathered.

It was strange, but true, that Abel had, in pursuing his tortuous course through the cave, come out near this very spot, and when the party emerged in view from above, he beheld all from his hiding-place. With the eyes of a basilisk Abel watched. Edith was placed upon a couch of leaves to one side of the fire. The hermit, held by two stout braves, was brought into the full firelight. The White Wolf hurriedly addressed his braves, his words being received with evident gratification. Then he turned to the captive.

"Wal, old man, I don't s'pose you understand what I said to these braves, so I'll repeat. You've did us a heap o' mischief—killed a durnation lot o' critters as you wasn't fit to hold a torch to, an' o' course you've got to take the consequence. Tain't much—only a little fun, ye see, an' you kin go free a'ter it's over, if ye want to. You see the point o' rock up thar? We'll jist throw a rope over it, then hitch a slip-knot over your thumbs an' haul ye up a little ways. Unfortunately fer you, the boys has built a fire under it, but thet'll soon burn down. Understand?" and the White Wolf laughed diabolically as he peered into the hermit's face, while the savages appeared delighted.

"Do your devil's work," coldly replied the hermit, apparently unmoved by the horrible threat. "I am a man—words alone cannot frighten me."

"We'll try more'n words, then," angrily snarled Grable, as he made a sign to the savages, then seized the captive.

A rude though stout rope was now produced. It had been manufactured from strips cut from the skins found in the cavern. This was, with considerable difficulty, cast over the point of rock alluded to by the renegade, both ends reaching the floor. Upon one of these a neat slip-knot was made.

"Now tell me whar the young feller hid—Abel Dare," suddenly uttered Grable, stooping forward to peer into the captive's face, a venomous glitter in his eyes.

"I am not a white Indian—a traitor and renegade, to betray my kind. Go seek—mayhap you will find him."

"Better tell—it'll make it easier fer ye, if ye do."

"A lie—foolish and barefaced. You have resolved to kill me, and even if you were inclined to be merciful, these men around would take the job out of your hands. Go on—you will gain nothing from me," coldly replied the hermit.

In his rage Grable struck the captive a brutal blow in the face, the blood trickling from where his heavy fist alighted; but the hermit did not flinch an atom. Half-frantic, Grable cut the bonds that held the captive's arms, and raised both hands above his

head, to slip the noose over them. Quick as thought, the hermit wrenched loose from the savages, who were holding him, and struck the renegade to the ground. But then he was seized again and held fast, despite his desperate struggles.

Howling with rage, Grable sprung up and plunged a knife into the captive's breast. With a wild cry, Edith sprang forward to arrest the blow. Cursing her, Grable struck her a fierce blow in the face. With a moaning cry, she sunk to the ground.

A wild cry—horrible in its intensity of rage—rang through the cavern, and then a dark form shot through the air, alighting beside Grable, whose throat was clutched with a giant's grip, as he staggered backward, borne to the ground beneath the shock. It was Abel Dare, wrought to madness by seeing his loved one so brutally stricken down.

The savages started back in affright and amazement. At first they believed themselves attacked by something more than mortal man. Thus released, the hermit staggered upon his feet. Then, with a hollow cry, he turned, and rushing forward to the edge of the encampment, he leaped and was gone!

CHAPTER VIII.

A FIERY ORDEAL.

THE Wood King did not notice the pause of Abel Dare, nor did he make the discovery that he was alone, until fully a mile had been traversed. Then, as he repeated an unanswered query, he turned around.

The young man was not in sight. Believing him to be close at hand, Boone uttered a low whistle, to hurry him up. But there came no answer. Again and again, with increased volume, the signal rung out; but the result was the same. No answer came to the impatiently listening ears.

Wonderingly Boone began retracing his steps. What could have happened? Surely no serious accident, or he must have been alarmed.

His soliloquy abruptly terminated. A faint sound met his ear that, at first, he thought might be the strayed, but then he knew better. Instead of one pair of feet, there were a full score. The Osages were once more closing upon him.

For a moment the Wood King listened as though undecided what course to pursue. By pressing forward in that one originally pursued, he might possibly escape detection, but it would almost certainly be fatal to Abel Dare, who, ignorant of the crooks and turns of the trails, would easily become bewildered and thus fall an easy prey to the savages. Reasoning thus, Boone struck into a trail that bore abruptly to the right, gliding rapidly along.

For a while he believed he would escape without being sighted by the Osages, but then this hope died out. As he turned an abrupt curve in the trail, he caught sight of a dark figure gliding toward him. There could be no mistaking it; the moonlight was still too clear for that. The figure was that of an Osage warrior.

A collision was inevitable. At nearly the same moment, the savage caught sight of the pale-face, and drawing his tomahawk, flung back his arm for a cast, uttering the shrill yell of discovery. Quick as were his motions, the Wood King anticipated them, and with a spiteful report the long rifle sent its leaden pellet crashing through the Indian's brain, turning the cry of triumph into a shriek of horrible agony. Then a corpse lay quivering upon the rocks.

For a moment Boone almost despaired. In answer to the yell of the now dead savage, cries were echoing from every point of the compass. The wood-ranger was surrounded. Since entering the rocky track, the Osages had scattered, some entering each one of the numerous trails that branched off from the main one, so that, by Boone's backward movement in quest of Abel Dare, he had glided into their very midst. Death or capture seemed inevitable.

Still the Wood King was not one to tamely submit while a chance remained him. Knowing that a yell and the rifle-shot would draw the savages directly to that spot, he darted forward past the dead body, on the faintest chance that this trail was now unoccupied by other than himself.

Scarcely had a hundred yards been traversed ere a shrill whoop rung out from the right, telling that his flight was discovered. Clinching his teeth, Boone darted ahead with all the speed he could bring into play over such a rough trail. Bounding over boulders with the activity of one in his prime, scrambling up or climbing down an abrupt ascent or descent, the Wood King fled from his enemies, who were now fairly upon his track. A thrill of renewed hope pervaded his being as he became convinced that his enemies were all behind him; that the slain savage had been the only living obstacle in the way of his flight.

Having more than once explored this strange tract of ground, Boone improved every little advantage, losing no time in making useless turns, heading direct for a place of refuge not far distant, where he hoped to elude his persistent pursuers. Evidently the Osages divined his purpose, for they pressed on at reckless speed, more than one coming to grief upon the jagged rocks in their mad haste. Their yells rung out loud and piercing. Boone's brows contracted as he thought of the result should their cries arouse some of the wandering band of foes ahead, and enable them to cut off his flight. Then he smiled grimly at the wild, improbable idea.

The rock-bed was cleared, and the hunted scout darted forward with accelerated speed. A narrow, gravelly tract was passed; then came one of sand, thickly covered with coarse grass. Beyond this the grass grew more rankly, with straggling oak and

thorn bushes. Through this Boone darted, heading straight as the crow flies, with the nearest savage two hundred yards behind, now running in stern silence, straining every muscle to the utmost in the endeavor to overtake the fugitive before he could reach the covert for which he was heading.

On through the stiff, stubborn bushes Boone dashed; then another belt of grass lay before him. The end was now near at hand, and he felt invigorated. Again the savages yelled, this time partaking more of chagrin than anticipated triumph. Boone smiled grimly, his head bent forward, his steps carefully calculated.

The nature of the ground changed again. It would give beneath his feet, springy, elastic. Occasionally a few drops of water would be dashed aside. It resembled the edge of a swamp; the mud, though growing soft, was not sticky. The grass began to grow in irregular patches, with black spaces between. Here and there the moonlight was reflected back from water. Still beyond grew a dense wall of something grayish brown. This was the hiding-place toward which Boone had been tending.

In fact it was a large pond, covered with a dense growth of wild-oats, reeds and bushes. The water was nowhere deeper than a man's height. Amidst this thick-laced growth a fugitive might lie hidden within arm's-length of an enemy, without being seen.

Suddenly Boone raised his head. The yells of his pursuers were echoed back from the opposite side of the pond. Faintly glimmering through the undergrowth he could distinguish a camp-fire. Evidently a party of savages had been resting there until aroused by the shouts of their kindred, and were now spreading out to intercept the game that was afoot.

Even had he not resolved upon it, there was now no other course open to the Wood King but to seek refuge in the pond, and he hastened on, bounding from one tussock to another like a deer in full flight. Suddenly he disappeared from view of the savages who had paused at the edge of the pond. He had sunk down in the water, crawling forward until the dense grass was reached. This he carefully replaced behind him, and then listened intently.

All was still save the rustling of the fresh breeze swaying the grass and reeds. What devil's plot were the savages hatching? Why did they not search for their prey? This course Boone had counted upon their following, feeling sure that while they were thus engaged he could manage to steal away unseen. While wondering, he cautiously loaded his rifle, and then, noiselessly as possible, pushed on toward the middle of the pond.

For half an hour he stood waist deep in the water, anxiously listening for some sound by which he might judge of the enemy's movements, but in vain. But then his face was upturned, and he sniffed quickly at the air. A faint trace of smoke was perceptible—and yet the wind was blowing away from the camp-fire he had seen. Could it be? An involuntary exclamation of horror broke from his lips. Only too plainly he read the truth.

The Indians were setting fire to the reeds and grass! But would it burn? Eagerly Boone felt of that growing so thickly around him. It cracked and crumbled beneath his hand. It was dry as tinder to within a foot of the water. And now the smoke was thicker and more dense.

Hastily he plunged on, seeking for a spot where was open water, but in vain. The reeds grew everywhere. Then he paused. A warning sound came to his ears. It was the roaring, rushing voice of the devouring element, crying aloud for its victim.

Crushing a handful of the stuff, he placed it upon the pan, then discharged his rifle. A spark caught. Tenderly he blew his breath upon it. It flickered—grew larger—then died out. And the roaring of flames grew louder and nearer, and the smoke was almost unbearable.

Slinging the rifle on his back, Boone cut and slashed at the stout-stemmed grass and reeds, flinging them from him in handfuls, clearing a space around. The sweat rolled from his face—not alone from the violence of his exertions, for the air was now hot and parching—like that of an oven. Already he found it difficult to breathe.

Sinking beneath the surface, he tore at the muddy bottom, scooping up great handfuls, and then daubing it over his head and face. Then he tore off the woolen hunting-shirt and wound it around his head and neck. He could breathe more freely now, since the smoke was excluded. And, too, it shut out the horrible glow that now lighted up the scene, and deadened the sickening roar.

Again and again he dipped beneath the surface to cool his aching temples; then as he felt the intense heat, the falling particles of the reeds and rushes, Boone knew that the fire-fiend was upon him, and inhaling a long breath, he sunk beneath the surface, his head touching the cool, muddy bottom. Clinging to the slimy roots, he lay there until it seemed as though his lungs would burst. Then the long-pent-up breath came forth. For a few moments longer he resisted, then rose to the surface. Though the breath he now inhaled seemed blistering his throat, Boone gasped with delight. It was renewed life. But then the heat seemed melting his very brain, scorching the woolen garment that now steamed like a furnace, and again the hunter sunk to the bottom.

Twice was this repeated, then as a cooler current of air struck the shrouded head, he tore the bandage free and glared around. A broad wall of flame was gradually receding. The surface of the pond seemed one living coal. A second glance showed him this was the water-soaked part of the growth, too green to blaze up.

The fiendish yells of the savages came indistinctly

to his ears above the crackling roar. He started and bent his ear keenly. Then his face lighted up. From one side there came no yells. It seemed as though the savages had deemed it impossible for the pale-face to live through the fiery ordeal, and had all flocked to cut off his retreat to the opposite side to that on which the fire had been started.

Without reflecting that, notwithstanding the silence, some might have been left to guard this point too, Boone plunged forward, thrusting the growing stalks down into the water as he proceeded, feeling that this was his only chance of escape. To wait until the fire was out and the smoke-cloud raised from the surface, he knew would be fatal. Then the keen-eyed savages would espy him, when captivity or death must follow; for he was too greatly exhausted to flee for life now.

Hurriedly he pressed forward, too hardly bestead for time to think of using much caution, for he must gain the undergrowth beyond before the flames died out, or be discovered. Gaining the shallow water he crept forward, crouching low down, with drawn knife, ready to sell his life dearly. But no alarm was raised as he gained the edge of the pond. That side seemed deserted.

With a muttered prayer of thanksgiving, the Wood King pressed on with as much speed as he could extract from his weary, sorely-tasked limbs. At length he sunk down behind the first line of bushes, and glanced back.

The flames had swept the pond clear to the further shore, and were now rapidly dying out. Flitting here and there, he could just discern several human forms. They were the Indians, and he knew, by their actions, that his flight had not been discovered. Still, knowing that his trail would eventually be found and followed, Boone dared not give way to the drowsiness that was stealing over him, and so arose, pressing steadily on until the rock-bed was gained. Here his trail would be lost. Knowing this, he felt that he was saved, and kneeling, rendered thanks to the One who had so wonderfully preserved him.

Yet he dare not halt here for the rest he so greatly needed. He knew that his trail would be followed to the rock-bed, and that thoroughly searched by the savages before they would allow such an enemy to escape. So he wearily pressed on, through the gray light of coming dawn, shaping his course by the knowledge that Lightfoot must be impatiently awaiting his coming at the cave by the Osage.

Clearing the rock-bed, he struck a direct course for the rendezvous. The cool morning breeze greatly revived him, and partially dispelled the drowsiness. Once he paused. There came to his ears the faint sound of yelling, from the far right. Though he knew it not, it was the discovery of Abel Dare by the Osages under Seth Grable.

Half an hour later Boone discovered two smokes: the nearest light and fleecy, the other dark and heavy, arising as he calculated with a peculiar thrill, from the vicinity of the cave. Was it a signal kindled by Lightfoot to hasten his coming? This interpretation did not satisfy him, though he could think of none other.

Both smokes were before him, almost in a direct line. Hastily advancing to the opposite swell, he crept along until he could look down into the valley. From a small grove of trees beside a tiny creek, arose the smoke. Even as he looked, a body of horsemen filed out into the open ground. A wild cheer broke from his lips, and leaping up, Boone ran forward, waving his hand as a signal.

The party instantly halted and seemed about to turn back into the grove, but then appeared to recognize the comer as a white man. Breathlessly Boone gained their side, but not until he spoke did they recognize him. Black mud had dried upon his face and hair. His skin, what little was visible, was burned to a blister, blackened with smoke. A more deplorable looking object could scarcely be imagined.

Amid their hasty questions, the eyes of Boone were anxiously fixed upon the smoke column beyond the prairie. Reason told him that Lightfoot was too good a scout to kindle such a beacon when so many enemies roamed through the country. Abel Dare might have done it, but was he there? Boone doubted it.

"Boys," he said, speaking hurriedly, "I believe that smoke means danger to a friend of ours—one true as steel, though his skin is red. I mean Lightfoot, the Kickapoo chief. Will you lend a hand, or must I go alone?"

"Nary lone—not much!" cried Jim Fosdick. "You think the reds is at the devil's work over thar—wal, we jest kum out skelp-huntin', an' these'll do as well's any others, 'specially as we kin save a fri'nd by wipin' 'em out. What say, boys—be I right?"

Every voice was raised in assent, and then Boone leaped up behind the lightest weight, and gave the word for hard riding. From the next valley they heard rifle-shots coming from the direction of the smoke. Upon the next ridge human voices were borne to his ear; the yelling of exultant savages. And the smoke grew blacker and blacker, rising in a tall, sloping pillar.

The party grew more excited. Knife-points were used as spurs. Snorting with pain and excitement, the horses thundered on at break-neck speed. The prairie was passed, the timber began, the ground grew more broken; but the smoke-column now floated above their heads.

"Light and tie," cried Boone, leaping to the ground. "We kin go faster now afoot, an' the horses' hoofs would tell the heathen we was comin'."

Rapidly the settlers obeyed, and then hastened across a densely-wooded ridge. From its summit

Boone saw that his fear was well-founded. From the hill that crowned the cave, the smoke arose. The red flames were bursting from the hollow tree. *And seemingly standing amidst the roaring fire, was a human figure!*

Down the hill they glided, across the valley, then up to the last belt of bushes, unheard, unseen by the yelling demons above. As their rifles cracked, a wild cry broke from their lips. The human form leaped out from the tree, its garments ablaze, holding a flaming bow in one hand. Down—down, until it reached the ground, with a dull, sullen *thud!*

Unheeding the cry in their excitement, the savages broke cover and rushed in a body toward the figure. At that moment the settlers poured in a deadly volley, then charged up the hill, uttering their terrible war-cry.

Over a dozen braves fell—the others seemed petrified with horror. But as the settlers came closer, the survivors turned and fled with all the speed left in their bodies.

In hot pursuit the settlers followed—all but the Wood King. He rushed to the spot where the man had fallen, and tore the still smoking garments away. A groan broke from his lips as he recognized the body. It was that of Lightfoot.

Boone knelt beside the body of his comrade. Then he started abruptly back. A hand moved—glided swiftly to the charred belt, clutching the hot handle of a knife. The chief's eyes opened, a mad fire burning in their depths. He struck viciously at the kneeling form. Boone caught the hand and held it fast.

"Chief—don't you know me—your friend?"

Slowly a change came over the blistered face, the fire softened in his eyes, and the weapon fell to the ground. The mouth opened—a husky gurgle followed. He could not speak. He had breathed the scorching flames too long.

Great tears rolled down the Wood King's face, for he knew now that his friend—tried and true, though with a red skin—was dying. But he dashed them aside, as Lightfoot made a peculiar gesture. One hand traced a circle in the air, then touched his own bare and blistered head, afterward motioning toward a dead Osage that lay near.

Boone read the pantomime aright, and shuddered, but he could not refuse the last request of a dying friend. He dragged the Osage near, then averted his face. Lightfoot partially raised his body, and tore the scalp from the gory skull. Then he shook it aloft, a horrible sound parting his lips.

Boone turned quickly. The outcast fell back. He had died while attempting to sound his exultant war-cry.

CHAPTER IX.

BOUND TO THE STAKE.

SNARLING with the intense ferocity of some wild beast, Abel Dare fell upon the renegade, burying his fingers deep in the flesh of his throat, shaking, worrying him much as a terrier handles a rat. Had he a weapon, however small, the career of the White Wolf would have ended then and there, for, though a strong man, the maddened lover handled him like a child. Already his tongue protruded, his face blackened.

But then an Osage warrior recovered from the surprise sufficiently to administer a sharp tap upon the back of Abel Dare's head that felled him senseless upon Grable.

Grable staggered to his feet, gasping, rubbing his livid throat, his tongue and eyes gradually assuming their usual position and appearance. Speechless, he made signs that Abel should be firmly pinioned. Edith crept to the side of her lover, as though to shield him from injury with her own person. Cursing bitterly, Seth Grable tore her away.

Grable, having regained his voice, was frightfully enraged. He showered curses the most horrible upon the helpless settler, spitting in his face, buffeting, kicking him unmercifully. A whitish froth tinged his lips—he seemed a madman.

At length he turned and uttered a few hasty words to his followers, and a yell of fiendish delight greeted the speech, as the warriors glided away to execute the order. Grable again crouched down beside the captive, a devilish grin upon his face, as the words parted his lips:

"You heard me tell the Injuns? But mebbe you don't understand the lingo. Wal, I told 'em to git a lot o' wood an' pile it up down thar at the foot o' the path. Goin' to hev a barbecue—d' y' know what that means?" and the brute laughed diabolically.

Abel made no reply. He did understand the renegade's meaning, perfectly. He knew that he was doomed to perish horribly at the fire-stake. Though a sickening chill crept over his frame at the thought, he gave no outward sign that the words had made any impression upon him.

Grable eyed him steadily for a moment, then turned hastily away, as though afraid to trust his passions. He hated this man so intensely that a single blow, though it carried death with it, would not satisfy his revenge. Afraid to tempt himself, he strode hastily to the cave opening.

"Abel—Abel Dare," faintly uttered a low, quavering voice.

"Edith—thank God! I feared you were dead!"

"No—better that I was, perhaps. But you, oh! Abel, why did you act so rashly, when you were once safely beyond the reach of these demons?" and Edith groaned.

"I saw him raise his coward hand and strike you—I saw you fall as though dead, and it made a madman of me. I thought only of avenging your murder, and—"

"So got caught yourself—'zactly so, my children,"

added the harsh voice of Grable, as he advanced and seized Abel by the collar. "But you've talked a-plenty fer now. Don't be impatient, little 'un; I'll come fer you in a minnit."

He dragged the captive over the ground toward the outer rim of the camp, which was in the rocky hollow from which the passage started. Near this outer boundary of the spot was a deep rift or pit in which to fall was to go to doom. Gaining the ledge, Grable lifted Dare upon his feet, pointing one hand down to the plain below. The Indians were hastily gathering fuel from among the rocks to the left, where it had fallen down the cliff from the trees above. A considerable pile was already collected.

"More'n enough to roast you to a turn, anyhow," chuckled Grable. "I put it down thar so the smell won't bother my new squaw in thar. We'll set here, looking at ye. So screw up your courage—member a woman'll be lookin' on."

Abel bit his lips hard, and threw all the strength of his frame into one effort to burst his bonds; but in vain. The stout skin did not betray its trust.

"No use, man—not a bit. You're booked fer—"

Why did Seth Grable pause so suddenly and turn his eyes down upon the plain? Why did the savages drop their loads of wood and dash toward the trail leading upward to the cavern? Why did Abel Dare utter such an exultant cry?

Because the quick, heavy thud of horses' hoofs beating the turf in full gallop came to their ears. Because a body of horsemen, nearly one score strong, burst into view around the spur of the mound, charging with a hoarse cheer—their rifles and pistols playing rapidly upon the fleeing forms of the surprised savages, who had left their weapons within the cavern, laying out a full dozen of the dusky warriors, writhing in death-agony, or lying motionless as they fell, their blood staining the white shingle.

At their head rode one—tall, muscular, his face and long gray hair stained with black swamp mud; yet through this disguise Abel Dare recognized the Wood King, Daniel Boone! Loud and clear, above the tumult, he cried:

"Help! for the love o' God! Edith Mordaunt is held captive up in this—"

But then his speech was abruptly checked as Grable hurled him heavily to the rocky ledge, at the same moment sinking out of sight himself.

But the words were heard and understood. The captive settler had been seen and recognized. And with a simultaneous yell, the borderers sprung forward, abandoning their horses, treading hard upon the heels of the fleeing red-skins as they scrambled up the narrow trail.

Cursing horribly, Grable dragged Dare into the passage along with Edith; then seizing an armful of weapons, both muskets and bows and arrows, he darted back to the ledge, just as the foremost Osage gained it. A few hasty words—then the White Wolf leveled a musket, and fired at the leading pale-face. A deep groan—then the slain man fell back upon his comrades, momentarily checking their advance.

Thus encouraged, the Indians followed the example set them, and rained arrows and bullets down upon the foe. Without means to return the compliment, the settlers consulted prudence and hastily retreated, seizing their rifles and seeking cover behind the bowlders, while the savages yelled loudly in triumph. And above all rung the taunting laugh of the renegade.

The Osages seemed intoxicated with their victory. At that moment one word from the White Wolf would have sent them headlong down the hill, charging upon the pale-faces. But Grable did not utter the word—nor did he even think of it. Besides being a rascal, he was a coward. However, their dance was abruptly terminated as a single report came from below, and a savage dropped to the ledge, shot through the brain. The next moment not a living soul was to be seen.

Five minutes later a strong voice from the plain called out:

"Hellow, you fellers up thar! Kin any o' you talk white man's lingo? 'F so, step out an' show yourself."

"That you may hev the fun o' takin' a crack at me, eh, Jim Fosdick?" returned Grable, from the ledge.

"No—honest Injun. We want to see 'f we can't come to some sort o' tarms. Show up—we won't tetch ye."

"Wait a minit, an' I will."

Grable hastened to where the two captives lay bound, and stooping, raised Edith in his arms. An angry cry broke from Abel's lips, and he strove desperately to break free, but in vain. The next moment Seth Grable stood upon the ledge, holding the maiden before him in such a manner as to perfectly shield his body; and laughing, he demanded:

"Now, what ye want? Here I be—talk quick, though."

"What'll ye give for us to let ye go free?" asked Fosdick.

"You let us go free? Why, ye pesky fool, we're two to one now. You cain't keep us here one minnit, 'f so be we want to git away," sneered Grable.

"Lyn's cheap, or you'd starved to death long ago. But never mind that now. The matter's jist this. You're up thar, we're down here. You cain't come down unless we say so. We've got nineteen rifles—sixteen men to han'le 'em, sence you rubbed out three. We kin pick ye off one by one as fast as ye putt fut over the edge. An' it's either that or starvin'. They ain't much game up thar, I don't reckon. Then you'll sca'cely drown'd yourself,

'ca'se water's too sca'ce. Thar it is in a bullet-mold. How d' y' like it?"

"Even s'posin' it was all true—which it ain't by a durned sight, mind ye—it'll be nice fun to think that while you was starvin' us, you was doin' the same to your fri'nds; to this gal an' Abel Dare."

"It wouldn't be very scrumtious, I know," coolly returned Fosdick, "but then, sich is life. 'F you fellers hold out, bein' durned contrary fools, why then they's got to suffer, thet's all. But I said tarms, a bit ago. We want to give ye a chainece. Send down the boy an' gal, safe an' sound, an' we'll 'low ye till mornin' to git to a safe spot. Mind ye, 'tain't 'ca'se we love ye any, but we don't want to hurt the boy an' gal, if so be we kin help it."

"S'pose I say I won't do it?" sullenly replied Grable.

"Then we'll do one of two things," abruptly cried the Wood King. "We'll either take you by storm, or lie here until we starve you out. Now decide, quick!"

"I must talk 'th my braves fust," and Grable stepped beyond view of those below, his face corrugated.

The consultation was long and animated. Edith listened to their words, though not comprehending the harsh dialect, and closely watched the expression of each speaker. Her heart sunk deeply as the braves followed each other. A new hope, faint though it was, had sprung up in her bosom at the settlers' demand, but now it was destroyed. She knew that the savages had refused to accept the terms offered them.

"Ye see, pet, ye're mine, beyound all hope," laughed the White Wolf, as he again raised Edith before him.

"I'd rather die then—"

"It's like you *will*, but then you've got to be mine *fast*. You cain't overjump *thet*, nohow." Then adding, in a raised voice: "Hellow, you fellers! down thar!—our answer is, jist do your level durnedest. But, mark my words. The very fust lick you strike at us, 'll be the death o' these captives. We've got a big fire a-burnin' in thar. We'll jist rake it out here, tie the boy an' gal together an' pitch 'em on the coals, an' let 'em sizzle right afore your eyes. Mind ye, now, I'm talkin' right from the book—it's swore to."

"This is your last answer, then?" sternly demanded Boone.

"With a few words more, yas. You jist take your critters an' ride straight away east until you git to the fur-hill whar the two trees grows side by side. You 'light thar. A'ter that you kin do jist as you please. Come back a'ter us, if so be you think best. We'll be out thar in the open, then."

"And if we refuse?"

"Jest what I told ye afore. Strike one lick, and you kill your fri'nds. We've got the deadwood on ye thar!"

"Give us ten minutes to think it over," added Boone.

Grable granted the request, and then returned with Edith to where Abel Dare lay. Here he began taunting the young man with all the ingenuity of a foul-mouthed rascal, until called hastily away by a shout from the savages without. Rushing to the entrance, he found his braves greatly excited. In a moment he learned the truth. The settlers were about to attack them, despite his sanguinary threats.

Spreading out, holding their rifles primed and cocked, in readiness for an instantaneous shot, the settlers were approaching the sloping trail. A few yards from its base six of them halted, their weapons covering the ledge. Two men glided up to each of the six, laying their rifles at their feet, then making a rush for the mound. These last had their knives and all the pistols belonging to the party. The other six were to protect them while clambering up.

Several Indians rushed to where a good-sized bowlder lay, rolling it to the edge. Two rifles cracked—two Osages dropped, shot through the brain, having carelessly exposed their persons. The scaling party shouted exultantly. Those who had fired dropped the empty weapons and seized fresh ones, once more covering the ledge.

A savage drops flat upon his face, then pushes the bowlder forward by main strength. It rests upon the edge—another effort, and it topples over. A cry comes from the foremost man, now nearly at the top of the trail.

It is Boone. The next behind him is Jim Fosdick. The latter bows his head to the rock, clutching the sides of the hollow path. The feet of Boone rest upon his broad shoulders. His open hands are flung up and meet the bowlder. A moment of horrible suspense. If his muscles were unequal to the task, their fate was sealed.

A desperate effort that causes the whole human line to quiver and shake—then the bowlder is turned aside and goes thundering down the mound, dashing far out upon the plain, the jagged points stained only with blood from the palms of the Wood King. Loud yell those below—the Osages howl with baffled fury.

The White Wolf shouts a few words, then rushes into the cavern. The Osages clutch their weapons and spring forward. The rifles of the marksmen below speak rapidly, each bullet sounding a death-knell. A savage kneels down and aims a vicious blow at the Wood King with a hatchet. His arm raises—a pistol flashes—the Indian falls forward, his skull shattered to atoms, his hot blood besprinkling Boone's face.

A yell, horrible and unearthly, comes echoing from the passage into the hills behind them. Then a wild, maniacal laugh. Instinctively the combatants pause, wondering, awe-stricken.

Two Osages dart into the darkness; they are sworn friends to the White Wolf. They fear he has met harm. That thought conquers their superstition, redoubles their courage.

Passing the fire, they pause. Where the captives laid, there is only one body now—that of a man. They reach its side, stoop over it—start back in horror. It is the gory form of the White Wolf!

And from out the gloom beyond comes the horrible laughter.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH.

EDITH MORDAUNT and Abel Dare lay side by side upon the rocky floor of the passage into which they had been borne for safe-keeping. They discovered that their prison was indeed a rocky chamber out of which the passage led, both into the outer air and into the hill. In that chamber Seth Grable had left them just as he was startled by the cries of his comrades, as the settlers began their desperate attack. And with beating hearts, whose throbs were almost suffocating, the captives listened, hoping, praying, that the pale-faces might overcome the Indians, and rescue them from what, otherwise, was almost certain death.

Believing themselves alone, they gave free expression to their hopes and fears, little dreaming that human ears drank in their every word, that human eyes were even then upon them, as they lay just within the firelight. Then, with a step that made no sound, a tall figure glided from out the darkness and stood over the wondering captives. And well they might feel surprise, for the hermit stood before them in the flesh, apparently unharmed!

A loud cry came to their ears from without, followed by the rapid tramp of feet. Some one was approaching from the outer air. Stooping, the hermit severed the cords that bound the lovers, at the same time warning them to lie still. Then he sprang back into the shadow.

The White Wolf, a moment later, bounded into the fire-lighted circle, his features horribly distorted, the devil painted in each bloodshot eye. His intentions are easy told. He intended dragging the captives to the ledge, and there expose them to view of the marksmen below, while some of his braves knelt close behind them to pick off the attackers. He knew that the settlers would not wantonly sacrifice their friends, and depended upon that to free him from this new peril.

"Come—them cursed bounds out yender hev spoken yer doom. Better lose a squaw than a life, though I hate to see ye rubbed out, gal," muttered Grable, bending down.

"We'll live to see you die!" gritted Abel, his hands clutching the renegade by the throat, then hurling him with violence to the ground.

A yell of terror broke from his lips, echoed back by a cry so horrible that he glared around in amazement. Then a shadow sprang forward. The hermit stood over him. The firelight without flickered up—there could be no mistake. Grable shuddered with a nameless awe. There seemed something supernatural in these abrupt vanishings and reappearances.

"Mercy—don't kill me!" he gasped, as the bright glimmer of steel filled his eyes. "I didn't mean you no harm when—"

"A dog you've lived—a dog you die!" gritted the hermit.

Then the long knife-blade descended twice, burying its length in the heaving breast of the craven wretch. A horrible yell of agony—a shrill laugh of diabolical glee—then the hermit sprang to his feet.

From without came other sounds—the savages would soon be there to investigate the alarm. Unarmed save with a knife, the pale-faces could expect to do little. Knowing this, Abel seized Edith and clasped her firmly to his breast, saying:

"You know the crooks and turns of this place—lead on, then, before those devils are upon our backs. Quick!"

"True, she must be saved: for you and I, it matters little. Follow me—tread carefully, and keep in my tracks. You have seen a specimen of what the cavern contains, but there is more. Let the heathen follow us if they dare; there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth in the lodges of their people!" and again the wild, almost maniacal laugh of the hermit rung out, reaching the ears of the savages, causing them to glare hurriedly around, with a vague expectation of beholding some supernatural horror.

Into the bowels of the hills—across a chasm spanned by a bridge, taking a passage that led sharply to the right, the hermit led the way, on through the darkness, never once faltering, though at more than one point a single misstep would have ended in hurling the trio down to inevitable destruction. On he led, Abel following, Edith close clasped to his breast. Still on, winding deviously, now in one direction, now in nearly its opposite, until Abel felt his brain grow unsteady and commence to whirl.

"Now you can wait here until I return. Do not attempt to leave—the ground is full of pitfalls made by nature."

"But should—if you should not return as you expect?"

"True—I forgot. Give me your hand. There—that is clay. By loosening that you will find a passage that will lead you out upon the hill. Dig twenty feet and you will come to a rock. Press hard against it with your shoulder, and you will roll it out. Here is a knife with which you can dig. But don't attempt that for at least half an hour. There is no danger of the heathen reaching you here, for, even if they attempt it, I shall be in the way—and one man, with a knowledge of this trail,

is equal to a thousand in open ground. Remember—wait half an hour."

The hermit rapidly retraced his steps. He was now totally unarmed, but felt little concern on that score. He possessed a knowledge that was equal to an armory.

Pausing upon the bridge of rock, the hermit glared out upon the swooning renegade, over whom stooped two braves, seeking to check the flow of blood that saturated his garments. A devilish light deepened in the hermit's eyes. He saw that the renegade still lived—possibly might recover, and a bitter curse hissed through his grating teeth as he groped around the edge of the rock with his hand.

Then again he stood erect, a rugged fragment in either hand. True as the bullet from a hunter's rifle the rock sped through the air. Full upon the banded head of the nearest savage it fell, crushing in the skull-bone. The second brave sprang hastily to his feet. The other rock struck him upon the breast, felling him like a shot. Laughing horribly, the hermit sprang forward, bending over the terror-stricken renegade.

The wounded savage utters a faint cry, and partially rising, flings his knife at the hermit. The sharp blade sinks deep in the fleshy part of the shoulder, but is unheeded by the seeming madman. The moaning White Wolf is raised bodily from the blood-stained rock, and borne to the edge of the muttering, rumbling abyss. A moment—then a horrible shriek rings through the hollow hill as his body descends like a shot; a sullen splash—then all is silence save the grumbling tones of the water fiend.

And now the hermit stood possessed with a knife, a hatchet, a stout bow, and tolerably well-filled quiver.

With ready bow he glided silently along, choosing the deepest shadow, where the glow of the fire could not penetrate. He seemed to have only thought for vengeance. He knew that he was death-stricken—in his madness he resolved to exact a heavy compensation. His death would be a dear one to the Osages.

He paused, the phosphorescent glitter deepening in his eyes as he caught sight of several human forms, crouching close to the rugged walls, their attention turned toward the cave-entrance, their weapons in readiness for instant use. They were Indians. He could distinguish them quite plainly by the light of day beyond, though from the ledge they would be invisible.

After escaping the death threatened by the bowler, Boone had led his men upon the ledge, winning it by a fierce though momentary struggle. The Indians retreated into the cave darkness. To follow them there would be little short of madness, and the Wood King called a halt to consult upon the best plan of procedure. Lying close to either side of the entrance they waited. Inside were the savages; beyond them the hermit, all unsuspected, the fires of insanity blazing in his eyes, as he bent the stout bow.

The bow relaxed—the arrow sped—an Osage sunk forward, transfixed by the feathered shaft, his death-cry carrying consternation to the hearts of the warriors, for they knew not whence the death-shot came. Another *twang* was followed with a like result, and then the madman's shrill laughter rung out clear and devilish. In terror the Osages leaped to their feet and darted to the entrance. From bad to worse. Half a dozen rifles cracked, so close that their flashes scorched the flesh; and then the rangers rushed on to a hand-to-hand struggle. But the terror-stricken savages turned and fled.

Still before them sounded that horrid peal, and at the fire they faltered in terror. Following each other in rapid succession the feathered shafts carried death into their midst, each shot accompanied by a devilish laugh. Paralyzed with horror, the savages flung themselves upon the blood-running floor, hiding their heads. Upon them poured the rangers, mad, raging, striking and slaying, without mercy in their blind rage, until not one was left alive.

When the excitement was over, the over-wrought strength of the hermit gave way, and he staggered out into the firelight, and sunk to the floor like one dead. Boone, recognizing him, rushed to his assistance.

"Where are our friends?" he asked.

"Over there—take torches and bring them here, quick! I must not die without telling him—haste, I am dying!" gasped the hermit, blood tinging his long beard.

A party of rangers started in search of our friends, and soon found them.

The meeting was a joyous one, and much hand-shaking was indulged in before the last words of the hermit were remembered. Then the party hastily retraced their steps, Abel still supporting Edith, whose nerves had been sadly shattered by the terrible, heart-crushing events of the past few days.

They found the hermit lying in a pool of his own blood, his head upon the Wood King's lap, his eyes closed as though in death. But at the sound of footsteps he roused up and muttered a request for more liquor. Reluctantly Boone complied, holding the flask of corn-juice to his bloodless lips. The fiery liquor seemed to infuse new life into the wounded man's veins, and his voice was strong and distinct as he spoke.

"Abel Dare—come nearer to me. You must hear every word, for a dead man speaks to you. Not long since you told me you knew not whether your father lived or was dead. I am the only being living that can clear that mystery."

"Tell me, then. Can it be that you are—"

"Patience—I will tell you, but it must be in my own way. You told me your mother forgave him

upon her death-bed; she had nothing to forgive him, for he never did her wrong in thought or deed! Two men loved your mother—one was Reuben Dare, the other was James Hazelwood. The last took her marriage so greatly to heart that he lost his mind. His friends placed him in an asylum. One night it burned to the ground. James Hazelwood was among the missing. All thought him dead—buried in the ruins; but he was not. His hand kindled the fire; then he escaped.

"A short time afterward, your mother began to receive anonymous notes, leading her to suspect the fidelity of her husband. At first she treated them with silent scorn, but the cunning of a madman—for the hand of Hazelwood was in this—made black seem white—the innocent seem guilty. Then she sorrowed, still in silence. Reuben Dare, at any other time, would have noticed this, and soon learned its cause, but he was battling hard with adversity—trying to save himself from ruin. A series of misfortunes had swallowed his fortune; he was a bankrupt.

"Hazelwood saw all this, and timed his actions well. The night before the truth must be known, he watched your father at his office—it was nearly midnight when he started to go home. As he passed an alley, a heavy blow felled him to the ground. The next he knew he was in a close carriage, securely bound, rolling swiftly along. The carriage paused, Hazelwood dragged forth his victim, and then told him all—of the diabolical plot he had formed to ruin him even after death. Then there was a cruel blow. When daylight came, the corpse of your father was floating far out upon the Delaware bay. Wait, I am nearly done. More whisky—I am growing weak," muttered the hermit, faintly.

"That day your father's name was coupled with dishonor. They said he had robbed his creditors, and had fled with another man's wife. That was Hazelwood's revenge. But it was with him that the woman fled. But he was crazy—crazy."

"And who are you, that know of all this?" hoarsely demanded Abel Dare, his eyes glowing, his breast heaving.

"I am—I was—James—Hazelwood, the mad—"

A grating cry broke from the young man's lips, and he darted forward; but, with uplifted hand, the Wood King said:

"Stay—he is beyond your power now—he is dead!"

The words were true. The hermit was no more—had died with the horrible confession upon his lips. There was much left unexplained, that would now be forever buried in oblivion. Of his life since the crime—how he came to be a wanderer in these wilds, a hermit, no one would ever know.

Yet Abel felt a feeling of relief far down in his heart, for now he knew that he had not been the son of a double criminal; though his father had been unfortunate, he had not been guilty of the crime that had rested upon his name.

The day was far spent, and as much yet remained to be done, the rangers decided not to return to the settlement that night. A soft couch of leaves was made for Edith under shelter of a rock, where she almost immediately sunk into a deep and dreamless slumber, the first she had enjoyed since the night before the massacre.

The Indian bodies were cast into the pitfall, but a grave was dug outside for those of the settlers who had fallen.

The rangers watched closely that night, but nothing was seen or heard of any enemies. With early dawn they took up their return march, reaching the settlement in safety.

Within one week the insurrection was put down—the savages sued for peace, and the country was once more safe.

That winter Abel Dare and Edith were married, and the girl who had been mistaken by Lightfoot for Yellow-hair stood bridemaid, having been released by the Osages at the new treaty.

And so we leave the couple, safely through the storm, basking in the sunshine of each other's love.

THE END.

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